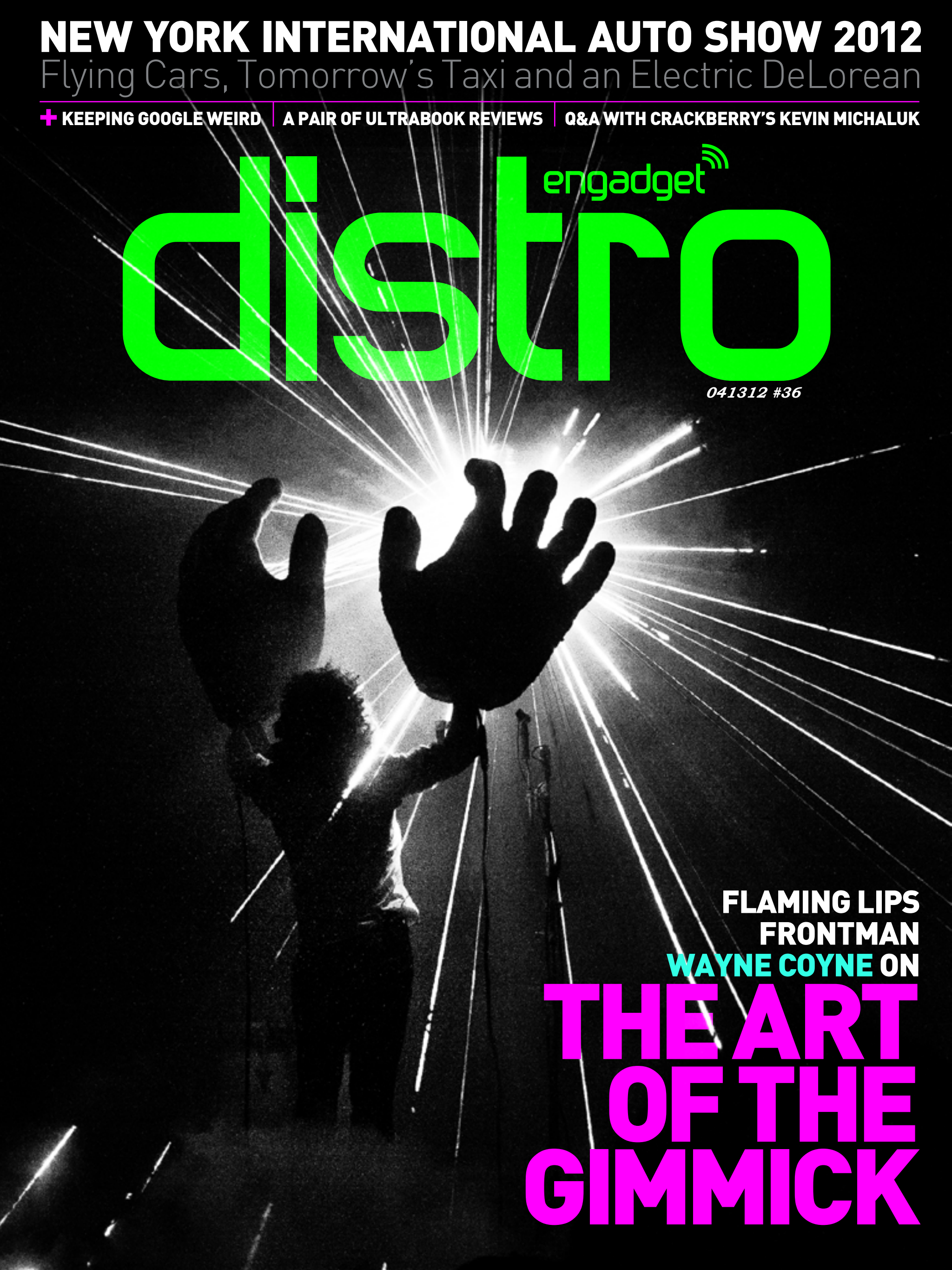
NEW YORK INTERNATIONAL AUTO SHOW 2012

Flying Cars, Tomorrow's Taxi and an Electric DeLorean

+ KEEPING GOOGLE WEIRD | A PAIR OF ULTRABOOK REVIEWS | Q&A WITH CRACKBERRY'S KEVIN MICHALUK



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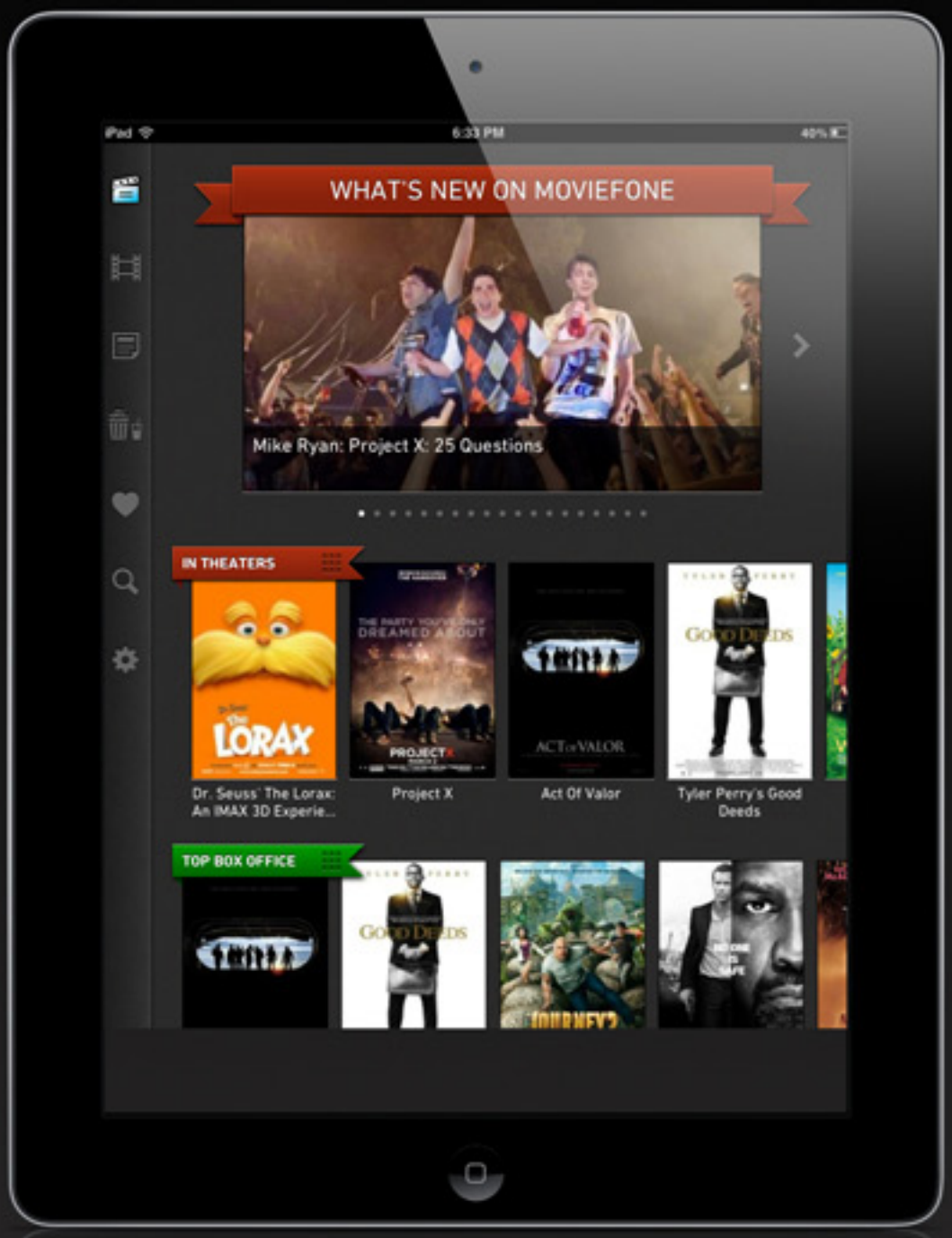
FLAMING LIPS FRONTMAN WAYNE COYNE ON

THE ART OF THE GIMMICK

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Greetings From Alaska

Editor's Letter

Hello from America's Last Frontier, the amazing state of Alaska. I've been lucky to spend about a week up here shooting what should amount to an incredible Engadget Show segment involving northern lights, helicopters, dog sleds and about the most extreme geocache hunt you can imagine. So, if I've been a little quiet on the social networks this week, that's why. But, I have had enough connectivity to keep up with the news, and to file this column, so let's get you up to speed.

Yet again it's Instagram making the biggest wave, but this week it's for very different reasons. When last we reported on the company it was celebrating the launch of its Android app, but now its employees were popping even bigger bottles of champagne as Facebook made clear its intent to purchase the company — for a cool one billion dollars. That's a huge price for a little company that a bunch of people love, making us wonder just what Facebook has in store for the service.

Founder Kevin Systrom was quick to make it clear that the app won't be locked down to



just Facebook sharing. Zuckerberg also echoed that sentiment, saying: "We think the fact that Instagram is connected to other services beyond Facebook is an important part of the experience." Indeed it is, so if the app isn't going to be locked into that social network, what exactly is its destiny? One-click Instagram filters for profile pictures seems like a lock, at a minimum.

That wasn't all the news about the funky photo-sharing service, though. The release of the Android app last week was plagued with something of a glaring issue: no support for HTC's current wunderphone, the One X. That's been rectified now, along with more love for Tegra 3 devices in general and fixes for some other nasty bugs.

Another recently released wunderphone is the Nokia Lumia 900 on AT&T. That device was ostensibly $99 on-contract when it was released, but a rebate from AT&T made the phone totally free for new subscribers. This week Nokia matched that for existing AT&T subscribers, meaning perhaps the greatest Windows Phone device on the market is now gratis for anyone who wants one — so long as they want a new two-year contract as well.

While I spent a lot of time on an Atari 800 as a kid, the C64 was my first "real" computer.

Those who have already succeeded in shrugging off AT&T contracts on iPhones can now get their device quickly and easily unlocked. Anyone who has an account in good standing and who has either made it through their years of indentured servitude or paid an ETF can now take their iPhone to an AT&T retail store or dial 611 to get their device officially unlocked. The former Ma Bell has made this process so easy, we think it should consider extending the functionality to newer, still on-contract iPhones too.

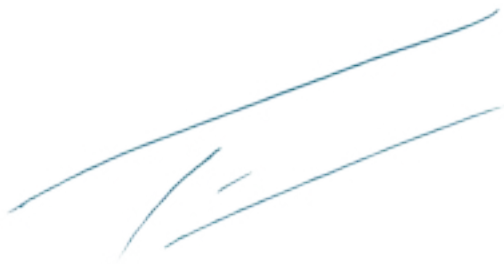
Microsoft won an injunction against Motorola in a big, multinational patent dispute surrounding some WiFi and h.264 patents owned by Moto. This injunction, won in US Federal Court, prevents Motorola from enforcing an earlier injunction awarded to it in a German court. Confusing? Yeah, a little, but suffice it to say that Microsoft can keep on selling its good, good stuff in Germany — for now.

However, one thing the company isn't selling (at least directly) is Windows Vista, an operating system that was officially checked into hospice this week. The platform is now on "extended" support and, while Microsoft will be pushing out security updates for the OS until April of 2017, official incident support will no longer be provided for free. As if you needed another reason to upgrade.

Finally, some sad news. Jack Tramiel, founder of Commodore, passed away at the age of 83. Tramiel was an Auschwitz survivor who immigrated to the United States, joined the US Army then later got a business loan to start a typewriter company. Commodore Business Machines was born and, after making typewriters and later calculators, the company moved into personal computers with the PET in 1977, followed by the hugely successful VIC-20 in 1980 and the monumental Commodore 64 in 1982.

While I spent a lot of time on an Atari 800 as a kid, the C64 was my first "real" computer. On there I learned BASIC and gathered a love for videogames that would last. Without those hours and hours and hours spent typing away at the giant beige-and-brown keyboard I don't know that I'd be where I am today.

In this week's Distro, Brian Heater sits down for a... dynamic conversation with Wayne Coyne of The Flaming Lips and Box Brown produces a new comic to match. Brian also weighs in on Google's latest toy, the prototype AR glasses that made such a stir last week, and tells us how this is something of a promising return to form for the company. Dana Wollman reviews Samsung's latest (and perhaps greatest) Ultrabook, the Series 9, while Michael Gorman evaluates the rather more comprehensively named Acer Aspire Ultra Timeline M3. We also have Darren Murph's take on the Nikon D4, a new IRL and Recommended Reading, Ross Rubin on niche devices that have been killed by the smartphone and CrackBerry's Kevin Michaluk gets the Q&A treatment. It is, as ever, quite a haul, so lift with your knees and enjoy.



TIM STEVENS
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF,
ENGADGET

Aww Snap! Facebook's $1 Billion Acquisition

There's no denying it's been a good month for Instagram. Before the Android version of the filter-packing photo app turned a week old, Facebook announced plans to suck up the outfit for a cool $1 billion. Since then, it has reportedly hit the top spot in Apple's app store and has been downloaded over five million times by Android users, but speculation about its future continues to bubble over.

Selected Reactions

It's toast. Not that users are going to abandon it en masse, but its credibility with its core users is shot.

@THAMUDUBE, VIA TWITTER

Owners that can't believe their luck, laughing all the way to the bank.

+LINDSEY BUTLER, VIA GOOGLE+

... Instagram has just become the Farmville of photography.

@COMEDY4CAST, VIA TWITTER

ADS, ADS EVERYWHERE!

@HI_ITS_KYLE, VIA TWITTER

What does Instagram's **$1 BILLION** Facebook deal mean for the future of the photo service? We want your take!

So far things that go into FB go into a black hole. It will eventually die out and be replaced by something better. Its current momentum will push it along for a while. The venture capitalists are enjoying their profit... once again.

+JOHN PUGH, VIA GOOGLE+



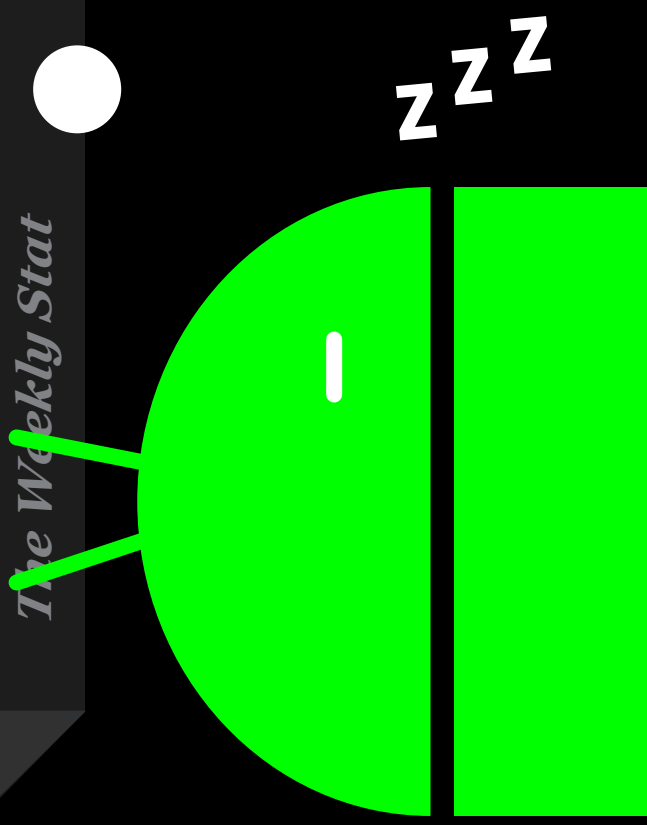


PERCENTAGE OF DEVICES RUNNING A GIVEN FLAVOR OF THE ANDROID OS

Do Androids Dream of Electric Treats?

As we check back in on Android’s Platform Versions dashboard for the first time since January, we can finally see notable growth in the percentage of devices running some flavor of Android 4.0 Ice Cream Sandwich, up from 0.6 percent to 2.9 percent. That’s likely fueled by the release of updates for the Samsung Galaxy S II and HTC Sensation family of devices, and is a sharp uptick from last month when it registered only 1.6 percent. Gingerbread (2.3) still reigns supreme, running 63.7 percent of the Android hardware that accessed the Play market in the last two weeks, but its growth seems to finally be slowing. Last year at this time that position was filled by Android 2.2, with 2.3 on just one percent of the hardware and Android 3.0 barely registering at all, a point which highlights the long cycle of upgrades. Call it fragmentation or flexibility, app developers can use these stats to plan their releases going forward, although it may be a little while still before the majority of the crowd can access any Ice Cream Sandwich-specific features. —Richard Lawler

The Weekly Stat



SOURCE: ANDROID DEVELOPERS

WHEN THE SMARTPHONE GIVETH, PART 1

Switched On



BY ROSS RUBIN

The rise of smartphones hasn't been kind to makers of devices such as digital cameras, digital music players and portable GPS devices. Handsets with a rich selection of apps have been increasingly cannibalizing sales of these products, leaving few ways for these once hot holiday gift items to compete. In some cases, though, they have enabled functionality that was once envisioned for standalone products that either failed in the market or never went much beyond a niche audience.

Here are five examples of failed devices that never made much headway. The concepts behind them, though, ultimately found acceptance on smartphones.

Slacker Portable

Today its offerings run the gamut from free streaming radio competing with Pandora to complete on-demand subscription access competing with Rhapsody, but what differentiated Slacker in its early days was the ability to cache Internet radio stations for offline playback. This was achieved via the Slacker Portable, the first version of which featured a large 4-inch display, but an awkward user interface and controls; stations could be cached via WiFi or sideloaded from a PC. A planned accessory that would datacast the Slacker service via satellite for use in the car never materialized. Slacker cleaned up its act considerably with the smaller and slicker G2 version of the device, but by then the writing was on the wall.

Nowadays, the Slacker app, which uses touch screens to provide a better user interface than was possible on the dedicated players, can cache stations and download songs via a wide range of smartphones and tablets, the iPod touch, some Android-powered media players and the Sony Walkman X. However, it requires a monthly fee for its ad-free Plus tier to cache stations whereas ad-supported caching was free on the devices.

Sony eMarker

Popular apps such as Shazam and SoundHound can identify songs after sampling just a bit of them

Ross Rubin (@rossrubin) is executive director and principal analyst of the NPD Connected Intelligence service at The NPD Group. Views expressed in Switched On are his own.

by tapping into a big music database in the cloud. But gadget-based song identification was tried a decade ago by the flash drive-like Sony eMarker (and its backed competitor, the Xenote iTag) using a kludgy workaround to audio fingerprinting. If you heard a song playing on the radio and wanted to know what it was, you would press a button on the device. Later, you'd plug the device into a PC and it would take you to a website that listed what was playing at the time by using a service that tracked radio song airtimes.

The eMarker had a small LCD that indicated how many of the ten songs allowed at a time you had bookmarked. It was a strange limitation because the eMarker didn't sample the audio itself. It recorded only a date and time stamp when you heard something on a default FM radio station. If you did something crazy like change the radio station you were listening to, you'd have to tell the companion website the station you tuned to or the song would be incorrect. Sony killed the eMarker after about a year and offered refunds to those who had bought it, making it one of the biggest flops of the era for Sony outside of the much more imposing and expensive BeOS-based eVilla monochrome Internet appliance.

...Gadget-based song identification was tried a decade ago by the flash drive-like Sony eMarker.

TrafficGauge

Today, free apps such as Waze and Google Navigation will route you around traffic; even the bundled Maps app on the iPhone can show trouble spots. But when far fewer people owned smartphones, a Seattle startup named TrafficGauge sold a handheld device of the same name that used the paging network to provide real-time traffic status updates. Since a sparse layout of the city was fixed on the device, a separate edition of the gadget existed for the four supported cities of Seattle, Los Angeles, San Francisco and Chicago.

TrafficGauge found itself embroiled in controversy when it began charging a monthly fee to consumers who had already signed up for lifetime service due to the rising costs from paging network operators. The company was ultimately acquired by RIM, where it joined the assets of Dash, an early cellular-enabled car navigation device that also made limited inroads.

Next week's Switched On will discuss the visions for two other dedicated devices that ultimately prevailed on smartphones and throw in a bonus marketplace failure from Microsoft that was ultimately realized on tablets. (Hint: it's not Courier.)

KEEP GOOGLE WEIRD

Editorial



BY BRIAN HEATER

There's a sign that hangs in the windows of shops in downtown Santa Cruz, California. "Keep Santa Cruz Weird." It's not unique to that town, of course — the best known implementation of the slogan is the one seen all over Austin, Texas. Localized versions have also been spotted on t-shirts and bumper stickers in places like Portland and Boulder — any area where the undercurrent of independent thinking does daily battle with the threat of homogenized commerce. The Santa Cruz example sticks in my mind in particular, of course, due to the five years I spent in that town. Its weirdness never fully recovered from the '89 earthquake, a natural disaster that both wreaked havoc on the landscape and caused a shift in the local zeitgeist, opening crumbled and abandoned storefronts up for Starbucks and Taco Bells — chain stores devoid of the character that makes the town so unique. So weird.

There are, naturally, growing pains with any company — particularly one that has had as meteoric a rise as Google has experienced over the past decade and a half. Evil claims aside for the moment, the transformation from a dorm-based project to an international corporation nearly always risks the loss of the character and principles on which the project was initially founded. After taking the helm as CEO last April, co-founder Larry Page stressed the need for focusing the company's countless product lines, announcing during an earnings call that, "We've [...] done substantial internal work simplifying and streamlining our product lines."

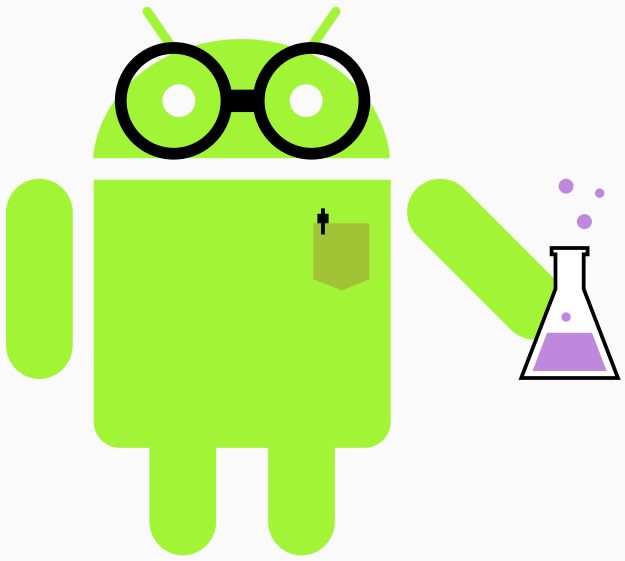
It's easy to appreciate the sentiment. As Google grows at a tremendous rate, it risks losing focus, following in the footsteps of companies like Yahoo, which never did all that great a job subscribing to its own "Peanut Butter Manifesto," by pruning away its ever-growing list of redundancy. Surely no one can fault Google for opting to pump more resources into successful properties like Android — brands with large user bases that require, arguably, even

Brian's work has appeared in Spin, The Onion, Entertainment Weekly, The New York Press, PCMag, Laptop, and various other publications.

more attention than the company has been able to allot thus far.

That aforementioned "simplifying and streamlining" meant, among other things, that certain pet projects would go on the chopping block. Notable among the losses was Google Labs — a segment of the company that always felt like more than simply a department. It felt like a philosophy, a concerted effort to keep some connection to the engineering pet projects that helped keep Google so innovative for so long, allowing employees time to develop their own projects, without the manner of bureaucracy that can sometimes bog down larger teams. Google described the concept as "a playground where our more adventurous users can play around with prototypes of some of our wild and crazy ideas and offer feedback directly to the engineers who developed them." And sure, many, if not most, never really got anywhere, but those that did offered a more unfettered sense of innovation, be they as actual products or simply ideas that helped drive larger concepts.

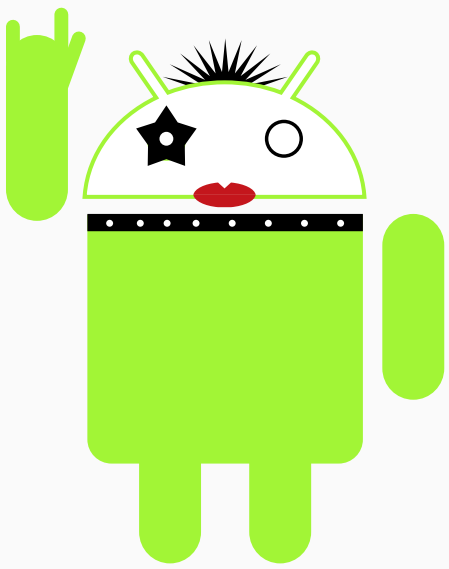
The sentiment reared its head again back in October when Google's VP of product management, Bradley Horowitz, told the crowd at AsiaD that his company would be "doing less of throwing things against the wall," instead focusing on fewer products. Products like Google+. We certainly weren't shy about our disappointment. Sure it was a touch hyperbolic to suggest that the dream was "dead" at the time, but it certainly felt like this Google wasn't our Google.



Google Labs felt like more than a simple department; it felt like a philosophy.

In a letter released this week, celebrating a year running the company, Page opened by reiterating the philosophy of focus. "Google has so many opportunities that, unless we make some hard choices, we end up spreading ourselves too thin and don't have the impact we want," Page wrote. "So we have closed or combined over 30 products, including projects like Knol and Sidewiki." The executive wraps things up with a decidedly different message, recounting a beloved college course centered on the principle of "a healthy disregard for the impossible," a philosophy that surely informed the launch of the search engine once known as BackRub. "It may sound nuts," explains Page, still waxing a bit nostalgic, "but I've found that it's easier to make progress on mega-ambitious goals than on less risky projects."

It's a sentiment that's surely felt a bit out of place for those monitoring Google's projects, as of late. The example that Page jumps to in his letter is Google+ Hang-



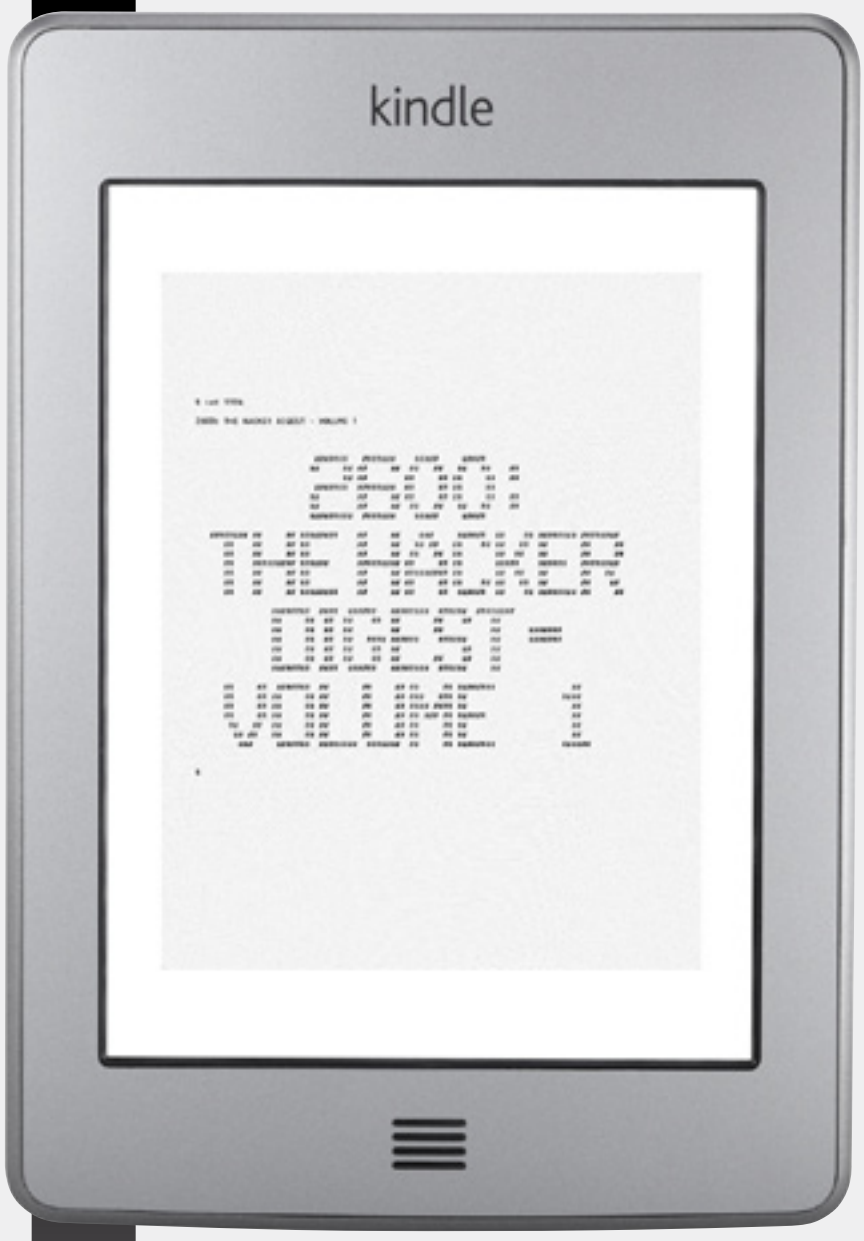
It's hard not to view the company as having lost some of that creative steam, some of that craziness, some of that weirdness that helped Google redefine the technological landscape.

outs, the product of "a small committed team that was crazy enough to believe this was possible." For most, however, Google+ has exemplified the opposite — a once crazily innovative company that has spent more recent times focused on more mundane projects. In the grand scheme of things, it's hard to frame the company's Facebook killer as a direct manifestation of the spirit that altered Page's way of thinking one crazy undergraduate summer. Sure there are innovative features to be had, but taken as a whole, the project feels like a play at an existing property — a play we've already seen Google make a number of times.

It's hard not to view the company as having lost some of that creative steam, some of that craziness, some of that weirdness that helped Google redefine the technological landscape. From time to time, the company drops a reminder of such innovation, however, a hopeful sign that Googlers are, in fact, still toiling away on pieces of nascent disruption — be it in the mysterious X lab or elsewhere. The company's self-driving cars certainly captured our imagination, as did the slew of April Fool's pranks it cooked up, even if those were created only in jest. ProjectGlass, the augmented reality glasses that we've been hearing whispers about, finally got a name this week. Google announced that it will begin testing the project in public, and began soliciting feedback from the community, an honest attempt to reach out, from a position that makes it easy to forget the needs of a consumer. Even Page's fellow co-founder Sergey Brin was spotted rocking a prototype pair.

With the release of those images and an accompanying concept video, the company has managed to do something it's largely failed to accomplish with projects like Google+: it's captured the public's imagination. And sure, there's seemingly a pretty good chance that, sadly, the heads-up displays may never make it to the eyes of the consumer, but even if they fail completely to reach a final version, the company will surely have plenty of applicable lessons to apply to other businesses moving forward.

Here's hoping that properties like ProjectGlass are not simply remnants of an earlier era, but are instead a sign that, for as large and seemingly vanilla as Google has become as one of the biggest companies in the world, that there's still an undercurrent of weirdness below the surface, constantly waiting to bubble up.



2600: The Hacker Digest - Volume 1

Edited by Emmanuel Goldstein

The no-brainer purchase of the month for folks interested in the history of hacking — or computer and telecommunications history, in general — is *2600: The Hacker Digest - Volume 1*, a $4 ebook that collects the first year of the long-running hacker 'zine (then published as a monthly newsletter). That year would be 1984, when Reagan was beginning his second term, Ma Bell was broken up and *2600* was publishing articles like "Hacking on Telenet," "ARPANet Hopping: America's Newest Pastime," and "Getting Caught: Hacker's View." Some of the articles included may only be curiosities today, but collected together they offer a fascinating look back at a time when our current digital landscape was just beginning to take shape. — *Don Melanson*

AROUND THE WEB

The Education of Google's Larry Page
by Brad Stone
Bloomberg Businessweek

It's now been a year since Larry Page took over as Google CEO, and by any measure it's been an eventful one. Here, Brad Stone catches up with Page to discuss how all those changes came to pass, what it means for the future and what he thinks of Apple's supposed "thermonuclear war" on Android.

Just One More Game ...
by Sam Anderson
The New York Times

The *NYT* attracted a lot of attention with this piece thanks to the animated GIF on its front page and an in-browser game that let you blast ads off its site, but the piece itself is notable in its own right, offering an in-depth look at the rise of so-called "stupid games" like *Angry Birds* and *Farmville*.

An Essay on the New Aesthetic
by Bruce Sterling
Wired: Beyond the Beyond

If you haven't heard about the "New Aesthetic" yet, you likely soon will if you frequent tech culture circles. The latest round of discussion surrounding the digital / video game-inspired art form was sparked by this lengthy essay by science fiction author Bruce Sterling, which explains its origins and why it may not be just a fad.

Rocket Radio
by William Gibson
Vice Motherboard

Vice's *Motherboard* website had a William Gibson two-fer last week, first with a video interview featuring the man himself (well worth watching) and secondly with this, an essay excerpted from Gibson's latest book, *Distrust That Particular Flavor* — itself originally published in *Rolling Stone*.



15-inch Samsung Series 9

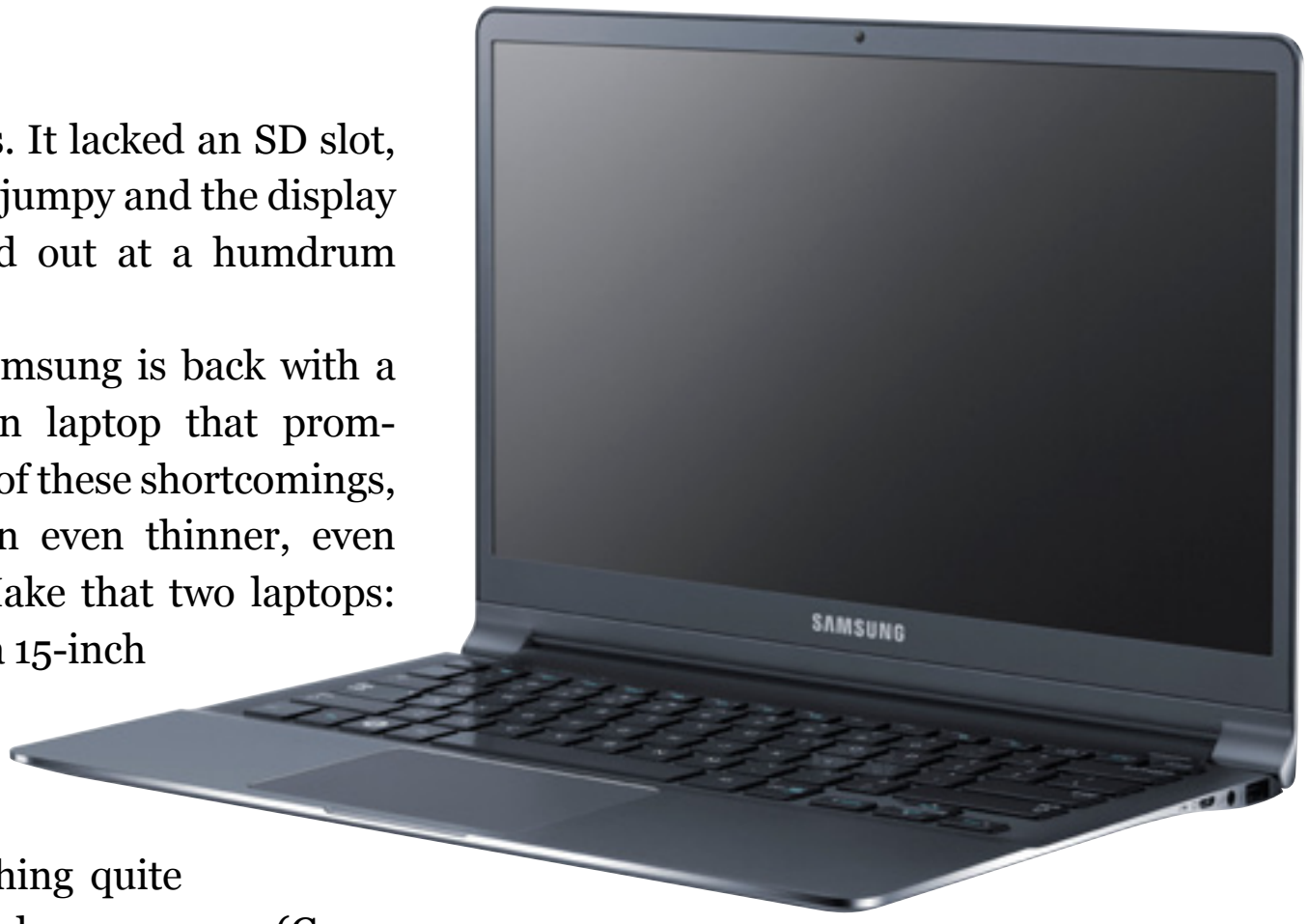
The Series 9 dazzles with its performance and striking design, but a machine this pricey deserves a comfier keyboard and even nicer display.

BY DANA WOLLMAN

Before there were Ultrabooks, there was the Samsung Series 9. When it arrived on the scene last year, measuring .64 inches thick, weighing 2.8 pounds and packing a blazing SSD, it seemed to offer Windows users the closest thing to a no-compromise experience — provided, of course, they were willing to pony up the requisite $1,649. As it turns out, the Series 9 was great — memorable, even — but

not without flaws. It lacked an SD slot, the trackpad was jumpy and the display resolution topped out at a humdrum 1366 x 768.

A year later, Samsung is back with a second-generation laptop that promises to correct all of these shortcomings, and ushers in an even thinner, even lighter design. Make that two laptops: Sammy's selling a 15-inch Ultrabook, too. And truly, there's nothing quite like it: nothing quite this thin, with this large a screen. (Consider for a moment that it measures just .08 inches thicker than the new 13-inch Series 9, which is already thinner than most other Ultrabooks on the market.) As always, though, luxury doesn't come cheap. The 15-inch Series 9 will cost $1,500 when it ships at the end of this month (the 13-inch version is available for an also-pricey $1,400, though we haven't gotten to take that model for a spin yet.) Ultimately, then, are the Series 9's elegant aluminum design and 1600 x 900 matte display enough to justify the premium you'll pay over other Ultrabooks? And does the 15-inch version offer long enough battery life to match its larger size? Let's find out.



Look and Feel

As rough as it is being an Engadget editor, watching hot-headed readers run amok in the comments section, it must be that much more agonizing to be a product manager, the guy whose baby gets eviscerated by anonymous people on the internet who really can't stand 1366 x 768 resolution, man. If not for the sake of politeness, you fine folks in the peanut gallery might want to choose your words carefully: Samsung's product team draws some of its user feedback from the comments left here and on other tech sites.

ENGADGET'S COMMENT SECTION WAS ONE OF THE PLACES SAMSUNG TURNED WHEN IT SET OUT TO RETOOL THE SERIES 9.

In fact, says Samsung's design team, Engadget's comment section was one of the places it turned when it set out to retool the Series 9. Based on what it found there, a couple things became clear: consumers weren't fond of the shiny plastic bits, and there wasn't

much love lost for those launch buttons and port covers either. That explains what we have here: a clean, minimalist machine fashioned out of unibody aluminum (sorry, no aircraft-grade duraluminum this time). The trackpad now blends in with the rest of the palm rest. Save for a small, discreet power button above the keyboard, you won't find any hardware keys. Even the LED lights (all two of them) are tiny.

All told, it's a refreshing strategy: instead of obvious tropes like brushed metal (or plastic painted to look like brushed metal), Samsung is relying almost entirely on build quality to persuade shoppers this is a luxury item. This laptop's thin shape, rock-solid build, bright display and clean design speak for themselves, and the result is not only sexy, but eminently tasteful, too.

What really makes this notebook special, though, is how absurdly thin it is. We know, we know: there's been a flood of svelte Ultrabooks announced over the past six months, and dozens more are on the way. (And yes, for the record, Samsung is calling this generation of the Series 9 Ultrabooks, just not in its marketing materials.) But even the jaded among you can't say you've seen anything quite like this: a 15-inch laptop weighing just 3.3 pounds and measuring .58 inches thick. This is far and away the skinniest 15-inch laptop we can remember seeing. To put that in context, it's *almost* as skinny as the 13-inch Series 9, which measures a wispy half an inch thick. It should go without saying, then, that it handily trumps all mainstream laptops, even the Dell XPS 15z, which at 5.54-pounds / .97 inches thick is otherwise thin for its class.

The problem with being this lean, though, is that without any love handles there isn't room for all the ports you'd expect to find on a 15-inch laptop. You won't find an Ethernet jack, and there's no full-sized HDMI port. You will find a micro-HDMI socket and miniature VGA /LAN ports, along with an included Ethernet adapter, though that's not quite as convenient, is it? (Samsung sells an optional VGA adapter as well.) On the plus side, it comes bearing two USB 3.0 ports, along with one of the 2.0 variety. There's also a combined headphone /mic jack and a 4-in-1 memory card reader, located underneath a door hidden on the laptop's right side. Looks like Samsung's engineers also heard your complaints about the last-gen model's absent SD slot.

Etc.

The power brick that ships with the Series 9 is notably thin, though it's not modular the way the HP Envy 14 Spectre's is. You also won't find as many luxury goodies in the box: while it comes with that Ethernet adapter, there's no case — something you'll get with the $1,400 Spectre and even the $1,100 ASUS Zenbook UX31.

Keyboard and Trackpad

No one ever said a machine this thin would come without compromises. One such trade-off seems to be the



keyboard, whose backlit keys are quite shallow, even for an Ultrabook. We suspect most of you will be able to do without that extra bit of tactile feedback, especially since the keys are well-spaced with a smooth, pleasant finish. The arrow buttons, too, are a bit larger than what you'll find on smaller-screened Ultrabooks, and should be easy to tap without looking away from the screen. (Ditto for the Tab and Caps Lock keys, which are inexplicably tiny, given the machine's 14-inch-wide footprint.)

The real problem, though, isn't that the keys aren't cushy enough, but that they're *sticky,* and sometimes fail to register key presses. Ultimately, we still managed to type the brunt of this review on the Series 9, albeit with copious taps to the Backspace key. To put things in perspective for all the comparison shoppers reading this, we'd still rather use this keyboard than the lifeless one on the ASUS Zenbook UX31, but by no means is it our favorite.

As you'd expect, the top row is home to all the controls you'd expect to find there (volume, brightness, etc.), though in this case you'll need to hold down the Blue Fn key to make use of them. Among these buttons, as it happens, is a pair of controls for lowering and raising the brightness of that lovely aquamarine backlighting. *But,* the keyboard only glows if the computer's ambient

light sensor determines you're parked in a dim enough room. And to address that follow-up question you tinkerers are about to ask, the answer is "no": you cannot force the backlighting to turn on in bright surroundings.

Once again, Samsung went with a sprawling clickpad for the Series 9, leaving plenty of room for multi-touch gestures. While we didn't get off to the smoothest of starts, Samsung released a driver update mid-way through our testing that noticeably improved the tracking precision and made pinch to zoom and two-finger scrolls easier to pull off. Still, you can expect a learning curve here. The pad (powered by Elan, this time, not Synaptics) often mistakes left clicks for right ones and vice versa — a complaint we have about many touchpads with built-in buttons. Fortunately, at least, it has smarter palm rejection than most: you most likely won't struggle with the cursor flying to random parts of the page as you compose emails. In any case, this is the same set of trackpad drivers used on the 13-inch Series 9, so if and when we give that guy a whirl, we'll be curious to see how Sammy refines the navigation experience.

Display and Sound

With the exception of a major jump in resolution (1600 x 900, up from 1366 x 768), this is the same 400-nit Super-Bright Plus panel crowning last year's Series 9 laptop. (And yes, that pixel count applies to both the 13- and 15-inch models.) Which is to say it's bright — brighter than pretty much everything else on the market. For indoor use, we think you can get by with a dimmer display (after all, most people do), but a screen this brilliant will come in handy if you get the urge to work on the patio, or in some nearby park.

A NON-GLOSSY DISPLAY ISN'T NECESSARILY A SHORTCUT TO WIDE VIEWING ANGLES.

Like last year's model, too, this screen has a matte finish, which means you can say goodbye to nasty glare from overhead lights. As we found with the Series 5 Ultrabook, though, a non-glossy display isn't necessarily a shortcut to wide viewing angles. If you dip the screen forward, you'll notice it starts to wash out, and colors lose some of their potency — a shortcoming Sam-

RIGHT PROFILE



FRONT VIEW



LAPTOP	PCMARK VANTAGE	3DMARK06
15-inch Samsung Series 9 (1.6GHz Core i5-2467M, Intel HD Graphics 3000)	10,580	4,171
14-inch Samsung Series 5 Ultrabook (1.6GHz Core i5-2467M, Intel HD Graphics 3000)	6,908	2,618
HP Envy 14 Spectre (1.6GHz Core i5-2467M, Intel HD Graphics 3000)	9,335	3,468
Dell XPS 14z (2.8GHz Core i7-2640M, Intel HD Graphics 3000 / NVIDIA GeForce GT520M 1GB)	7,982	5,414
Dell XPS 15z (2.7GHz Core i7-2620M, NVIDIA GeForce GT525M 2GB)	8,023	7,317
Dell Inspiron 14z (2.3GHz Core i5-2410M, Intel HD Graphics 3000)	6,177	4,079
Dell XPS 13 (1.6GHz Core i5-2467M, Intel HD Graphics 3000)	N/A	4,130
HP Folio 13 (1.6GHz Core i5-2467M, Intel HD Graphics 3000)	6,701	3,387
Toshiba Portege Z835 (1.4GHz Core i3-2367M, Intel HD Graphics 3000)	5,894	3,601
Lenovo IdeaPad U300s (1.8GHz Core i7-2677M, Intel HD Graphics 3000)	9,939	3,651
ASUS Zenbook UX31 (1.7GHz Core i5-2557M, Intel HD Graphics 3000)	10,508	4,209
Acer Aspire S3 (1.6GHz Core i5-2467M, Intel HD Graphics 3000)	5,367	3,221
13-inch, 2011 MacBook Air (1.7GHz Core i5-2557M, Intel HD Graphics 3000)	9,484	4,223
2011 Samsung Series 9 (1.7GHz Core i5-2537M, Intel HD Graphics 3000)	7,582	2,240

Notes: The higher the score the better.

sung might have averted had it chosen the kind of IPS panel used on the Spectre 14. Still, yours truly had no problem watching hours of *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* from an awkward side angle (you can't always have the choice seat in the house, right?). So it's not visibility that's the issue; it's that the colors and overall image quality aren't truly at their best unless you're looking at the screen head-on.

It's a similar story with the speakers. As it happens, we'd argue the sound quality is even tinnier than average, but it fares particularly poorly compared to the Zenbook UX31, which for $400 less offers stellar Bang & Olufsen audio. And though the Spectre 14's Beats setup isn't quite as impressive, it's still an improvement over the metallic, buzzy sound you'll get on the Series 9.



Two years after Intel Wireless Display debuted, it's finally become a table-stakes feature for new, reasonably high-end laptops. Like lots of other notebooks we've tested recently, the Series 9 incorporates the second generation of this technology, which allows users to wirelessly stream 1080p video to an HDTV or monitor. In addition to that, you could just mirror your entire desktop if what you're really after is a bigger canvas. As we've said before, the whole thing is easy to set up (even if you do need to drop an extra hundred bucks or so for an adapter) and the streaming is fluid — so long as you've got a strong WiFi connection at the ready.

Performance

The 15-inch Series 9 comes in a single configuration, with a 1.6GHz Core i5-2467M processor (the same you'll find in many other Ultrabooks), integrated Intel HD 3000 graphics and a 128GB solid-state drive. Similar specs as other Ultras we've tested, only this guy has twice the RAM: eight gigs. We're not sure if it's the extra memory or that Samsung-made SSD, but whatever the special ingredient is, this shapes up to be the fastest Ultrabook we've seen since the Zenbook UX31. We're referring, in part, to its five-digit PCMark Vantage score, but its real-world performance dazzles, too. Samsung claims that with its FastStart technology it should boot in less than 20 seconds; we were up and running in 14. Resume times feel near-instantaneous — less than two seconds, according to our stopwatch. Meanwhile, in the disk benchmark ATTO we saw peak read speeds of 521 MB/s and max writes of 266 MB/s. That doesn't beat the 550 MB/s reads and 500 MB/s writes we got with the UX31, but it's the closest any Ultrabook has come to matching it.

All told, that's an improvement not just over other Ultrabooks, but other 15-inch laptops as well. Even with a Core i7 processor and switchable NVIDIA graphics, the Dell XPS 15z scores 2,500 points less than the Series 9, and takes 25 seconds longer to boot up.

WHATEVER THE SPECIAL INGREDIENT IS, THIS SHAPES UP TO BE THE FASTEST ULTRABOOK WE'VE SEEN SINCE THE ASUS ZENBOOK UX31.

The Series 9's Intel HD 3000 graphics notch a higher score in 3DMark06 than other Ultrabooks, but that's not saying much. In *The Sims,* we saw frame rates

hover between 62 and 65 fps — about what you'd get from similarly specced laptops. Likewise, *Call of Duty 4* crawled along at 16 to 17 fps, as opposed to 15 fps in lower-scoring machines. If you really cared, of course, you wouldn't even be shopping for an Ultrabook (except, perhaps, this one).

It would be inaccurate to say the Series 9 stays cool — after a good hour or two of streaming video, a friend resting the laptop on his legs could feel the heat through the legs of his pants. That said, the notebook always felt more tepid than hot, and wasn't uncomfortable to touch.

Battery Life

Now that's more like it. After reviewing two larger-screened Ultrabooks whose extra weight didn't translate to longer battery life, we have the Series 9: a 15-inch laptop that weighs as much as a 13-inch Ultrabook, and lasts hours longer. In our standard battery rundown test, which involves looping a movie off the disk with WiFi on and the brightness fixed at 65 percent, it managed seven hours and 29 minutes. That's almost two hours more than the Toshiba Portege Z835, which is itself the most longevous 13-inch Ultrabook we've tested. Not to mention, it's a more impressive showing than what you'll get from a mainstream laptop like the XPS 15z. Even with its Optimus graphics turned off, that machine lasted just four and a half hours in the same test. It's clear that the Series 9 makes up for its larger size with longer runtime, and the best part is that its extra "heft" isn't much of an inconvenience anyway.

LAPTOP	BATTERY LIFE
15-inch Samsung Series 9 (2012)	7:29
Dell Inspiron 14z	6:37
HP Folio 13	6:08
Toshiba Portege Z835	5:49
ASUS Zenbook UX31	5:41
13-inch, 2011 MacBook Air	5:32 (Mac OS X) / 4:12 (Windows)
HP Envy 14 Spectre	5:30
Lenovo IdeaPad U300s	5:08
14-inch Samsung Series 5 Ultrabook	5:06
Dell XPS 13	4:58
Dell XPS 14z	4:54
Samsung Series 9 (2011)	4:20
Acer Aspire S3	4:11
Dell XPS 15z	3:41 / 4:26 (NVIDIA Optimus on / off)

Software

All things considered, Samsung barely saddled the Series 9 with any bloatware. On board, you'll find CyberLink's YouCam software, a common webcam console, along with Skype 4.2, Windows Live Essentials 2011 and, of course, Microsoft Office Starter Edition. Norton Internet Security 2012 and Norton Online Backup round out the list. (No free Adobe Photoshop Elements / Premiere Elements,

sadly. It looks like the Spectre's freebies may have spoiled us a bit.)

We usually don't have much to say about pre-installed security trials (you can keep them or choose your own, we say), but it is worth noting that every time we've tested a computer running Internet Security 2012 we've run afoul of the download-scanning feature, which consistently forbids us from installing a (harmless) .exe file that older versions of Norton would have approved.

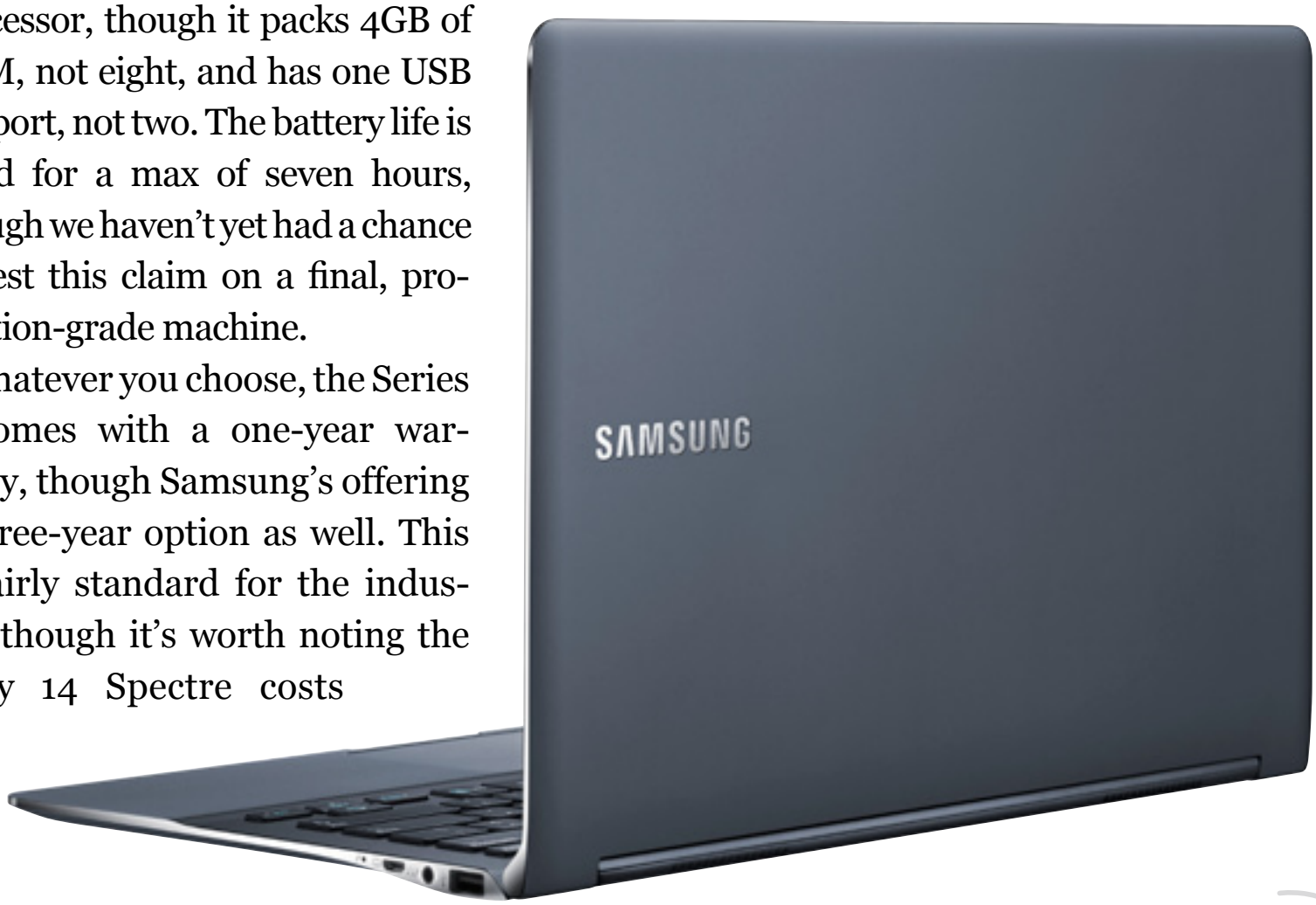
Configuration Options and Warranty

As mentioned, the 15-inch Series 9 only comes in one configuration, but this seems as good a time as any to clarify what you'll get if you opt for the $1,400 13-inch version instead. This, too, has a 128GB SSD and Core i5-2467M processor, though it packs 4GB of RAM, not eight, and has one USB 3.0 port, not two. The battery life is rated for a max of seven hours, though we haven't yet had a chance to test this claim on a final, production-grade machine.

Whatever you choose, the Series 9 comes with a one-year warranty, though Samsung's offering a three-year option as well. This is fairly standard for the industry, though it's worth noting the Envy 14 Spectre costs a hundred dollars less and comes with a two-year plan.

The Competition

None. As we've said, there's nothing directly comparable to the 15-inch Series 9: nothing this thin, this light, this fast with this big a screen. You *could* spend almost a thousand dollars less on a mainstream 15-inch laptop, but it would bring shorter battery life, slower performance and a clunkier, blander design, all of which defeats the purpose of owning an Ultrabook, if that's what you're considering buying. If you can live with a smaller display (and shorter runtime), you'll enjoy similar performance with a 13-inch Ultrabook. There are lots to choose from, of course, but we have a soft spot for the $900 HP Folio



13, which offers a great balance of speed, longevity, portability, ports, a comfortable keyboard and tasteful design. (Of course, at this price you'll be sacrificing the build quality and high-quality display that allow the Series 9 to command that higher price.) There are other promising choices, too, though you might end up making more trade-offs, whether it's a shallow keyboard, jumpy trackpad, skimpy port selection, short battery life or some combination thereof.

Wrap-Up

More than anything, the 15-inch Series 9 makes us giddy about what laptops will look like a year from now. After all, if the original Series 9 foretold a market full of skinny Ultrabooks, might this machine be a harbinger for other larger-screened Ultrabooks with fast performance and extra long battery life? As the only such laptop around right *now,* the Series 9 is impressive in its own right, though not quite the magic bullet we thought it would be. On the one hand, it's elegant and well-made with exceptional horsepower and robust battery life. On the other, its so-so keyboard and trackpad don't match the premium experience Samsung is trying to sell, and it's missing other top-shelf features like higher-end speakers and an IPS display with wider viewing angles. For $1,500, we'd expect all these things, though if eventually Samsung cuts the price (as it did with the original Series 9), these shortcomings might sting less. These imperfections aside, though, it's a solid laptop that keeps most of it promises as a luxury machine. If you need a new laptop *now,* and can't bear to step down to a smaller, lower-res display, *carpe diem!* Just keep in mind that there's room for other Ultrabook-makers to do even better.

Dana Wollman is Reviews Editor at Engadget, a marathoner, lover of puns and a native Brooklynite.

BOTTOMLINE

Samsung
15-inch Series 9

$1,500

PROS

- Remarkably thin and light for its size
- Long battery life, fast performance
- Bright, matte display

CONS

- Shallow keyboard, so-so trackpad
- Narrow viewing angles
- Unimpressive audio for the money

The Series 9 dazzles with its performance and striking design, but a machine this pricey deserves a comfier keyboard and even nicer display.



Nikon D4 Field Review

It's an amazing DSLR, but only a minor improvement over the already-astounding D3S.

BY DARREN MURPH

Almost three years after the introduction of Nikon's most recent game-changer (yeah, we're bragging about the D3S), its proper successor has emerged. Without qualification, the amount of hope and expectation surrounding the Nikon D4 was immense. In a way, most Nikonians were (perhaps foolishly) expecting the D4 to be to the D3S what the D3S was to the D3, and we'll confess that we too were cautiously saving up precious pennies in the event that the game was changed yet again.



For better or worse, the actual specifications of the D4 ended up being hardly worth writing home about, with an ISO range mirroring that already seen on the D3S, a megapixel rating lower than that of the cheaper D800 and a battery rated for fewer snaps than the outgoing D3S. All at an MSRP that's starting at $800 above where the D3S started. You'll notice a lot of comparisons throughout this article with the Best Camera of 2009, but that's intentional; yours truly has spent the last two and a half years using the D3S for business and pleasure, and it's only logical to pit the D4 against a camera that has become molded to the palms of many here at Engadget HQ. Is the D4 a worthy upgrade? Or even a worthy successor? Let's find out.

Design

Non-technophiles probably wouldn't be able to distinguish the D4 from D3S at first blush, and even avid users may need more than a passing glance to tell the difference. While there are subtle changes all around the body, the D4 is still a monster. In other words, those hoping for technology to magically shrink the size of this thing will be sorely disappointed. It's worth pointing out, however, that Nikon has shaved 2.1 ounces from the weight, which is *just* enough to be noticeable the first time you grab it (coming from someone who has touched a D3S on a near-daily basis for over two years, anyway).

Those familiar with the D3S layout will only require a short learning period to understand the layout on the D4.

While there are subtle changes all around the body, the D4 is still a monster.

The Live View button has been ever-so slightly moved, and there's now a dedicated video record button just north of the main shutter button. Not surprisingly, these are likely due to the D4's warming to HD video; this guy supports 1080p capturing (20-minute cap in 24p; 30-minute cap in 30p), while the D3S stops at 720p (and is limited to five-minute clips). We honestly can't say the repositioning of buttons on the D4 makes life any more or less beautiful; it's just… different. We *do* appreciate the two customizable multi-directional nubs on the rear, and we're happy to say that the infinitely useful toggle wheels are as solid and durable as ever.

The added thumb bumper along the bottom, which was implanted in order to provide a better grip when using the D4 vertically, is indeed a useful extra. Referencing back to the D4's penchant for shooting movies, there's also a very welcome microphone input (as well as a built-in mic for amateur captures). Perhaps the most jarring hardware change is the built-in Ethernet jack. We've covered the purposes of that rather extensively, but it strikes us as something that will benefit an incredibly small amount of shooters. Not that we've a problem with serving a niche, but we're assuming this is one thing that added undue cost to the overall package — something we'll address more in a bit.

One other interesting change here is the deletion of dual CompactFlash slots as seen on the D3S. Instead, users are presented with a single CF slot alongside an XQD slot. A few years from now, perhaps XQD will look like a more intelligent option, but it seems super awkward as-is. This move will almost certainly force shooters to now carry around *two* card readers — you may think that's no big deal, but a single extra thing to remember will almost certainly rub rushed professionals the wrong way. It's also impossible to buy a single XQD card over 32GB right now, while SanDisk is hawking a CompactFlash card with 128GB of room. Sure, the transfer rates can hit 125MB/s (compared to 100MB/s on the aforementioned SanDisk ExtremePro), but it's still tough to see the logic here. On the bright side, at least Nikon didn't shove a pair of XQD slots in here and force existing users to burn their CF cards in some sort of dark, hate-filled ritual.

"Quiet" Mode

We break this out mostly because of just how fantastic this feature is on Canon's own flagship, the EOS 5D Mark III. Over there, "Silent Shooting" can be used even in high-speed shooting, effectively





silencing bursts of shots in an auditorium where you'd be ejected if shooting with the typical, highly audible "click." On the D4, you actually have to move the mode dial beyond High-Speed Low and High-Speed Continuous, over to a dedicated "Quiet" mode. Here, you can only fire a single shot per shutter press, and each shutter click is delayed quite noticeably. Introducing even an eighth of a second into a nighttime shot can produce enough motion blur to ruin the moment, and worse still, this "Quiet" mode is really anything but.

In fact, it's probably 80 percent as audible as the standard click, but it drags on for what feels like forever. The standard click is over and done with instantly; the Quiet click is more like a loud sloshing noise that takes two or three times as long to finally fall silent. Under no circumstance would we recommend flipping to Quiet mode; you lose valuable shutter speed time, barely gain any noise reduction and pick up a click that will likely be even *more* noticeable by bystanders simply because of how obnoxious the sound is. These days, most folks at a venue can easily tune out a familiar sound — a baby crying, a camera clicking or a gentleman coughing — but this sloshing sound is impossible to ignore. We hate to say it, but Canon has Nikon beat six ways from Sunday on this one, and it's a shame; there are untold scenarios where professional Nikon shooters could use an *effective* quiet mode.

Display

Longing for a higher resolution panel over the D3S? Fuhgetaboutit. In fact, get ready for a panel with even *worse* pixel density. The D4 uses the same amount of pixels (91,000) in the D3S, but has a display that's 0.2-inches larger (3.2-inches versus 3.0-inches on the D3). It looks crisp and sharp, but it's hardly an upgrade. We will confess that zooming into shots up to 46x makes previewing on-the-fly a bit easier, but an increase in megapixel count means that you'll be wishing you had more dots on the rear of this thing.



ISO 6,400 | ISO 12,800 | ISO 25,600 | ISO 51,200 | ISO 204,800

ISO 25,600 and Beyond

As with the EOS 5D Mark III from Canon and Nikon's own D3S, you can indeed snap usable images at ISO 25,600. You won't want to blow 'em up and toss them on a wall, but for web usage (or just capturing blur-free memories for yourself or clients), it's at least *possible*. Anything at 12,800 or below is completely printable, and while you'll see visible noise on dark shots using ISO 8,000 or above, it's remarkably minor in the grand scheme of things. Even shots at ISO 51,200 could probably be used on the web, and shots at ISO 102,400 to 204,800 (Hi 1.0 through 4.0) quite literally allow you to capture subjects in near-pitch darkness… *handheld*.

But here's the thing: this isn't nearly as spectacular as it was in late 2009. When the D3S arrived, its nighttime abilities were unprecedented in the sub-$6,000 camera market. Fast forward two and a half years, and the D4 makes no major forward leaps when snapping after dark. Yes, autofocus can find its subject in the dark (perhaps with a touch more accuracy than the D3S), but we'd argue the nighttime capabilities of the D3S are at least 98 percent as stellar as on the D4. The additional quantum leap in nighttime shooting simply isn't here. Perhaps we can be faulted for expecting too much, but that's a bullet we'll happily take in the quest for the next.

Fast forward two and a half years, and the D4 makes no major forward leaps when snapping after dark.

That aside, the results at 25,600 and up are just as amazing as on the D3S. The following images were captured entirely at ISO 25,600 and up, with no tripod used. It's all handheld, and it's all at night. Also, no post-production (Lightroom, Photoshop, etc.) assistance was given.

HD Video Capture

Perhaps the most significant capturing update to the D4 compared to the





ISO 51,200
This shot almost ended up overexposed, when in reality there were no overhead lights on in the building. The light here was grabbed solely from semi-nearby windows.





ISO 25,600
It was actually far darker outside than this shot would lead you to believe, but shooting at ISO 25,600 pulled in that last inkling of light leading to a seemingly blue sky.

D3S comes on the video side. There's still no autofocus mode here when looking at video, but the ability to capture 1080p24 and 1080p30 with length caps as high as 30 minutes makes it immediately more useful than the D3S. That guy was capped at just five minutes of 720p.

What's clear is that — in the right hands — the D4 is capable of capturing *insanely* beautiful content. There's practically no jelly effect (a problem that doomed the D90's ability to be taken seriously as a video machine), and the ability to affix your own external microphone will

You'll be hard-pressed to blame the equipment for any lackluster shots that emerge from the D4.





surely tempt professional still shooters who have always wondered what they'd do with a formidable video mode.

That said, we can't really envision too many people coughing up six large to use the D4 predominantly as a video rig; if we had to guess, we'd say the value proposition of spending a grand more and getting *two* Mark IIIs for multi-angle shooting is far greater.

Image Quality and Focusing

We'll keep it short and sweet here: the image quality is truly remarkable on the D4. But here's the rub: it's just as remarkable on the D3S and EOS 5D Mark III, both of which are markedly cheaper. The color reproduction is just mind blowing at ISO levels below 8,000, and even between 8,000 and 12,800, the wash-out that emerges is applaudably minor. As with the 5D Mark III reviewed just weeks ago, we'd also trust the D4 to capture even the most vital of shots at any ISO beneath

12,800, which is hugely empowering when shooting dimly lit scenes. But again, it's here that we'll remind you that we said the exact same thing about the (cheaper) D3S some 2.5 years ago. You'll be hard-pressed to blame the equipment for any lackluster shots that emerge from the D4.

Nikon's autofocus system is improved, but only marginally. It's still a 51-point system, and while it's capable of finding objects in darker conditions, it still pales in comparison to Canon's 61-point system on the 1D X and 5D Mark III. That said, it's dead-on accurate in use and never left us wanting, but again, the 51-point system on the D3S never did either. (Perhaps you're noticing a trend.)

Battery Life

Here's an interesting one: the battery in the D4 is actually rated to take *fewer* shots on a full charge than the one in the D3S. You read that right, but there's an explanation waiting in the wings. The EN-EL4 and EL4a used in the D3 range is rated at 4,200 shots by CIPA, while the EN-EL18 (meant for the D4) is rated by the same entity for 2,600 shots. As the story goes, new battery guidelines out of Japan forced Nikon to design the EL18 differently, and CIPA estimates shots by firing a single shutter, waiting a bit and then repeating. Nikon seems to assume that most D4 users won't be using their camera in that manner, and if used in rapid-fire scenarios, the EL18 is actually estimated to last *longer* than the EL4 in the D3 line.

My wife and I carried both the D4 and D3S to a 10-hour wedding shoot, and both were left in the "On" position for at least 90 percent of the day. At the shoot's close, both batteries showed two bars of life left, but the D4 only captured 800 shots while the D3S captured nearly 1,800. That's real-world results, folks, and it's extremely disappointing to see a newer, more expensive Nikon DSLR ship with a battery that actually performs worse than the unit it's replacing. As if that wasn't unfortunate enough, the EL4 and EL4a *are not* compatible with the D4, nor the D4's charger. So, users hoping to upgrade to a D4 from a D3 will *not* be able to use their existing D3 battery in their new camera. Oh, and did we mention that the EL18 is currently priced around $70 more than the (more impressive) EL4a? Bah, humbug.

Wrap-Up

We wanted to adore the D4. In fact, we can vividly recall wondering weeks after the D3S' release just what on Earth Nikon would do to one-up it. Turns out, it's not exactly easy to revolutionize the photographic world twice in less than three years. The D4 is simply a refined D3S, with a smattering of features that may lure in new customers who passed over the D3S for one reason or another. Color reproduction, autofocusing and handling are practically identical to the D3S, and while the addition of an Ethernet jack, 1080p movie mode and an external microphone jack are appreci-

ated, they won't justify the $5,999 price tag for the bulk of buyers.

Even if the EOS 5D Mark III didn't exist, we'd still recommend the $5,199 D3S over the D4 for anyone who wouldn't routinely take advantage of tethered Ethernet action or the 1080p movie mode. When looking strictly at image quality and nighttime capabilities, there just aren't $800 worth of improvements here. And even for folks who will be forking out six grand to utilize one of the few truly new features on the D4, you'll be doing so while knowing that your money really isn't buying a significant upgrade in the low-light performance arena. Another way of looking at the D4 is this: the D3S is the D4's worst enemy. Nikon created such a transformational product in the D3S, that the D4 feels more like something that was produced to meet product cycle requirements than something designed to blow the doors off of Canon, Olympus, et al. once more.

The other harsh reality here is that the full-frame EOS 5D Mark III *does* exist, and it's currently selling for $3,499. That's $2,500 less than the D4, folks, and the savings you'll see by opting for it is more than enough to pick up one or two high-end lenses. There's simply no way for most users to justify the enormous price delta here, and even if you're beholden to Nikon due to a substantial lens investment, most everyone looking to make the leap to full-frame — hardcore videographers notwithstanding — are still better off grabbing a D3S on closeout. You might argue that Canon's 1D X is a more sensible opponent, and at $6,800, it's certainly closer in terms of price, but that beast justifies its MSRP with faster burst shooting, more AF points, a *native* ISO ceiling of 51,200 and a far, far more flexible HD movie mode.

Darren holds the Guinness World Record for being the most prolific professional blogger on planet Earth. He's also an argonaut.

BOTTOMLINE

Nikon D4

$5,999 *(body only)*

PROS

- Superb image quality
- Amazing low-light abilities
- 1080p movie mode

CONS

- A bit pricey
- Terrible "Quiet" mode
- Weak battery

It's an amazing DSLR, but only a minor improvement over the already-astounding D3S.

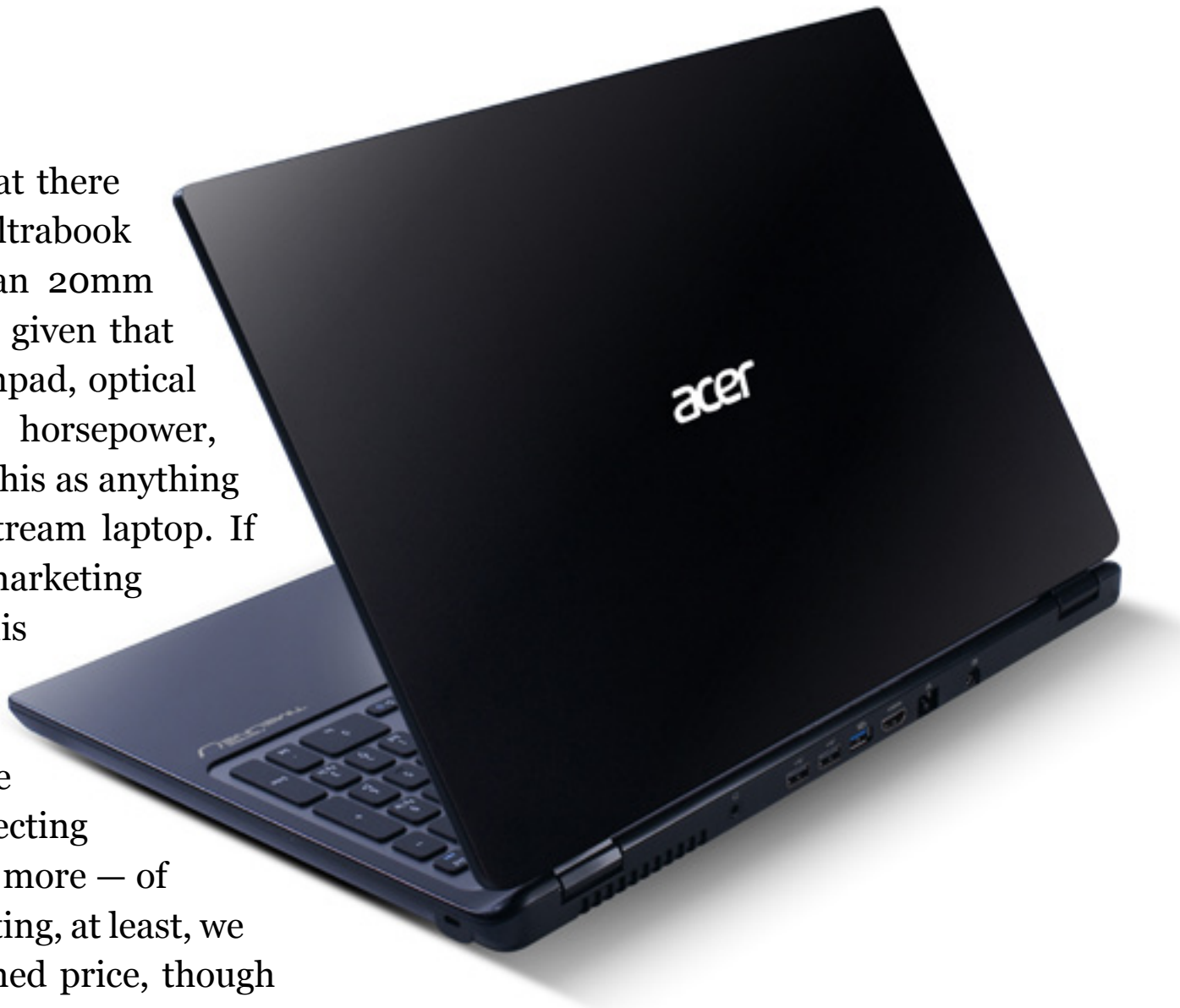


Acer Aspire Timeline Ultra M3

The Aspire Timeline Ultra delivers great performance in a svelte package, but a low-res display and cheap build materials keep it from being a lust-worthy laptop.

BY MICHAEL GORMAN

When Acer's Aspire Timeline Ultra notebooks made their first appearance at CES, these 14- and 15-inch laptops seemed like little more than the successors to Acer's TimelineX series. Thin-and-light laptops, complete with optical drive and some likely reasonable prices. While there's no mistaking that DVD burner and mainstream screen size, we now know a few things we didn't then: the 15-inch version you see up there packs NVIDIA's next-gen Kepler graphics... and Acer's calling it an Ultrabook.



Acer's branding that there Ultra M3 as an Ultrabook because it's less than 20mm (.8 inches) thin, but given that 15-inch display, numpad, optical drive and graphical horsepower, it's hard to think of this as anything other than a mainstream laptop. If you accept Acer's marketing scheme, though, this is the first so-called Ultrabook to ship with discrete graphics. (We're expecting to see more — many more — of these.) As of this writing, at least, we don't have a confirmed price, though Acer has said the pricing for the Ultra series should align with current TimeLineX notebooks (which is to say, we're hardly expecting this to be a $1,500 machine.) Until we know for sure, it'll be hard to say how sweet of a deal this is, but that doesn't mean we can't talk about what it actually *does*. How does the performance stack up against regular 'ol 15-inch laptop? Does it pummel your garden-variety Ultrabooks like you'd expect it to? Join us as we break down exactly what this 'tweener can do.

Look and Feel

At first glance, the M3 is a rather unassuming machine. The matte black exterior is fashioned out of polycarbonate, save for the textured chrome Acer logo and aluminum lid. The only other interruption in the monochrome exterior are some small, silk-screened text on the hinge letting you know there's "Professionally Tuned" Dolby Home Theater technology powering the audio — branding you'll find stamped on most every recent Acer laptop. Open it up and you'll find the palm rest and screen bezel swathed in the same ebony skin, while the recessed chiclet keys are surrounded by pewter gray plastic. There's an Acer logo beneath the screen, a 1.3-megapixel webcam in the bezel, and Aspire Timeline U branding placed below the numpad on the right palm rest, along with the obligatory Intel, Windows, and NVIDIA stickers affixed nearby.

Plastic skins rarely lend a laptop luxurious looks, and the M3 is no exception. For what it's worth, though, the fit and finish here are decent, with the only exception being the DVD tray, which isn't fitted as well as we'd like — when closed, the gaps to the left of and above the tray are notice-



Make no mistake, no one would guess based on looks alone that this is a premium machine.

ably wider than along the bottom and right sides. Make no mistake, though: even if those gaps were narrower, no one would guess based on looks alone that this is a premium machine.

Despite the use of such low-rent materials in the chassis, we're happy to report that this hasn't adversely affected the PC's construction much. There's zero flex in the palm rest, and while the keyboard could be coaxed to bend by pressing directly on the deck, typing on it produces no noticeable bowing. It's a different story with the display, as it can be made to flex and wobble quite easily — an issue the M3 shares with an unfortunate number of its competitors, including some made of metal.

Along the front edge of the laptop resides a slim chrome power button, LED activity indicator, plus a second light to let you know the laptop's charging status. Left and right speaker grilles are also located on the underside of that beveled front edge. On the laptop's left side is an SD reader and a tray-loading DVD-RW drive, while the right side is home to just a Kensington lock slot. That leaves the rear for most of your connectivity options: dual USB 2.0 ports (plus one of the 3.0 variety), HDMI, Gigabit Ethernet, a 3.5mm headphone jack and the power port. That's a pretty generous selection of sockets, and it compares quite favorably to other 15-inch thin and lights like Samsung's Series 9. While the rear-facing location makes for an uncluttered appearance, it also makes for woeful ergonomics: reaching back there to connect peripherals, headphones *and* the power cord feels like a chore. Every. Single. Time.

Keyboard and Trackpad

Back when we first put fingertip to keyboard on the new Timeline Ultra, we found a few flaws with its grid, and we're sorry to say they weren't addressed in



the laptop's final form. As with so many other Ultrabooks, the keys suffer from a shallow throw, though in this case the Tab and F-keys are undersized, and there's no backlighting. Like the rest of the chassis, the keys are made of hard, cheap-feeling plastic that left our phalanges yearning for the soft-touch buttons you'll find on a MacBook Pro or Samsung Series 9. On the plus side, the spacing between buttons is ample, which should keep misfires to a minimum. And we've always had a soft spot for numpads, particularly on machines with some gaming chops like this one.

Another Windows laptop, another middling trackpad. The Acer comes equipped with a plastic clickpad from Elan, and while two-finger vertical scrolling is fairly reliable, there were times when multiple attempts were needed to pull this off. Another niggle: the lack of an option for two-fingered sidescrolling. Similarly, pinch-to-zoom works most of the time, but touch doesn't always register, and when it does you'll have to settle for some seriously chunky scaling. Four-finger swipes grant direct access to the desktop — a feature we found quite useful when it worked — but again, the trackpad sometimes missed our input, forcing us to try multiple times.

It's not all doom and gloom in clickpad land, though: single-finger navigation works as it should, and right, left and double clicks on the pad register as they ought to.

Display and Sound

One word describes the display on the Acer Timeline Ultra M3: disappointing. It's a machine with some of the latest NVIDIA graphics, but the glossy LCD panel Acer chose doesn't make the best of the GT640M card inside. Resolution on the 15.6-inch screen is a paltry 1366 x 768, which puts pixel density at about 101 PPI. Now it's true, that pixel count is par for the course for budget laptops of all sizes, but if we're comparing it to other big-screen Ultrabooks, the panel doesn't compare favorably against either the 1600 x 900 IPS-quality display on the HP Envy 14 Spectre or the matte, 400-nit, 1600 x 900 panel on the 15-inch Series 9. Heck, even the $949 14-inch Samsung Series 5 Ultrabook has a matte, 300-nit display — that's a step up, even if it, too, has 1366 x 768 resolution.

Aside from an inability to adequately display details, the screen suffers from poor viewing angles. Tilting it back even an inch or two past the sweet spot results in the screen darkening, and moving it further leads to color inversion. Pulling it forward isn't any better, as that causes the kind of wash-out character-

LAPTOP	PCMARK VANTAGE	3DMARK06
Acer Aspire Timeline Ultra M3 (1.7GHz Intel Core i7 2637M, Intel HD 3000 / NVIDIA GeForce GT 640M, 1GB)	11,545	11,128
Samsung Series 7 Chronos (2.2GHz Core i7-2675QM, Intel HD 3000 / AMD Radeon HD 6750M 1GB)	7,824	8,891
Dell XPS 15z (2.7GHz Core i7-2620M, NVIDIA GeForce GT525M 1GB)	8,023	7,317
Lenovo IdeaPad U400 (2.4GHz Core i5-2430M, Intel HD 3000 / AMD Radeon HD 6470M 1GB)	7,281	4,463
Dell XPS 14z (2.8GHz Core i7-2640M, Intel HD Graphics 3000 / NVIDIA GeForce GT520M 1GB)	7,982	5,414
HP Envy 15 (2.4GHz Core i5-2430M, AMD Radeon HD 7690M 1GB)	7,210	8,839
14-inch Samsung Series 5 Ultrabook (1.6GHz Core i5-2467M, Intel HD Graphics 3000)	6,908	2,618
HP Envy 14 Spectre (1.6GHz Core i5-2467M, Intel HD Graphics 3000)	9,335	3,468
Dell Inspiron 14z (2.3GHz Core i5-2410M, Intel HD Graphics 3000)	6,177	4,079
Dell XPS 13 (1.6GHz Core i5-2467M, Intel HD Graphics 3000)	N/A	4,130
HP Folio 13 (1.6GHz Core i5-2467M, Intel HD Graphics 3000)	6,701	3,387
Toshiba Portege Z835 (1.4GHz Core i3-2367M, Intel HD Graphics 3000)	5,894	3,601
Lenovo IdeaPad U300s (1.8GHz Core i7-2677M, Intel HD Graphics 3000)	9,939	3,651
ASUS Zenbook UX31 (1.7GHz Core i5-2557M, Intel HD Graphics 3000)	10,508	4,209
Acer Aspire S3 (1.6GHz Core i5-2467M, Intel HD Graphics 3000)	5,367	3,221
13-inch, 2011 MacBook Air (1.7GHz Core i5-2557M, Intel HD Graphics 3000)	9,484	4,223
2011 Samsung Series 9 (1.7GHz Core i5-2537M, Intel HD Graphics 3000)	7,582	2,240

Notes: The higher the score the better.

ized by inverted colors and a sickly yellowish tint. Given those shortcomings, we were surprised to enjoy some pretty wide viewing angles from the sides, even as we approached 180 degrees. In general, though, the display makes for an underwhelming canvas whether you're gazing at a desktop of noticeably pixelated icons or playing *Battlefield 3* (much more on that later, of course).

As for those two front firing speakers, they aren't much more impressive than

the display. Sure, they could attempt to regale us with the dulcet tones and steel guitar of Robert Randolph and the Family Band, but like most laptop speakers, they provide neither rich sound nor any semblance of decent bass response. Suffice to say you're better off with some external USB units or using headphones if you want to listen to your tunes in a way even approaching how the artist intended. As for the EQ manipulation magic promised by that Dolby Home Theater technology? It didn't improve our audio experience much, if at all. Whether watching movies or playing games, we were never fooled into thinking that the sounds were coming from anything other than a pair of garden-variety laptop speakers.

LAPTOP	BATTERY LIFE
Acer Aspire Timeline Ultra M3	**5:11**
Dell Inspiron 14z	6:37
HP Folio 13	6:08
Toshiba Portege Z835	5:49
Samsung Series 7 Chronos	5:47
ASUS Zenbook UX31	5:41
13-inch, 2011 MacBook Air	5:32 (Mac OS X) / 4:12 (Windows)
HP Envy 14 Spectre	5:30
Lenovo IdeaPad U300s	5:08
14-inch Samsung Series 5 Ultrabook	5:06
Dell XPS 13	4:58
Dell XPS 14z	4:54
Dell XPS 15z	4:26
Samsung Series 9 (2011)	4:20
Lenovo IdeaPad U400	4:18
Acer Aspire S3	4:11
HP Envy 15	4:07

Performance and Battery Life

Our test machine came specced to the max, with a 256GB Lite-On SSD, 4GB of RAM, a 1.7GHz Intel Core i7-2637M CPU and, of course, that NVIDIA GT640M GPU and dedicated 1GB of video memory. Because of that speedy solid-state drive, boot times were like greased lightning: 1.3 seconds to wake from sleep, 12.7 seconds from hibernation, and 12.3 ticks for a cold boot. All those other internals made for a more than capable work machine, as it juggled three HD videos on YouTube, 15 open tabs in Chrome, a Skype chat and some light word processing in Notepad. Through our day-to-day use, the M3 never got more than mildly warm, and the fan only spun up periodically as we kicked into gaming sessions or watched videos for extended periods.

Speaking of gaming, we spent some time playing *Team Fortress 2*, *Skyrim* and *Battlefield 3* to see just how well NVIDIA's newly minted GPU performs. Suffice to say, we weren't disappointed. The GT640M routinely delivered frame rates between 55 and 60 fps as we ran around torching folks in *Team Fortress 2*. During walkabouts in the empire of Tamriel, meanwhile, frame rates consistently hovered around 50fps, dipping



into the 40s during battles. An NVIDIA rep promised its new Kepler architecture would enable us to play graphics-intensive *Battlefield 3* at over 30fps in Acer's 20mm-thin machine, and it delivered. On its high setting, frame rates hovered in the mid to low 30s, and on medium we got between 40 and 45fps. (The ultra setting slowed gameplay to twenty-something fps, so if you demand the utmost from your gaming experience, the Ultra M3 isn't for you.)

That said, most users should find the Ultra M3 provides ample horsepower to get their game on, and its capabilities truly are impressive given the machine's svelte profile. But, there's a catch. In order to take full advantage of the hardware, you'll be chained to a wall outlet — to conserve the battery, the GPU performance is severely curtailed when the machine's not plugged in. That's a serious drag, because a big part of the Acer's appeal is its prodigious gaming prowess in a super portable profile, but this limitation takes that away. We know that such sessions would necessarily be quite short due to the battery drain they would entail, but it sure would be nice to at least have the option to switch to a more performance-oriented battery profile during, say, a 30-minute train commute.

Benchmarks roughly mirrored our in-game experience (including a reliance on the AC adapter), as the M3 smoked PCMark Vantage with a score of 11,545 and pulled off an impressive 11,128 in 3DMark06.

Battery life on the Timeline Ultra M3 is good, but not amazing. We got five hours and 11 minutes out of its three-cell Li-polymer battery in our standard test, with a video looping off the hard drive, WiFi on and screen brightness set at 65 percent. In general workday use checking email, web surfing and word processing in Notepad, we got a little more than five and a half hours before needing to plug in. In our tests, the M3 bests most 15-inch laptops with discrete graphics (save the Series 7), but it falls short of almost every smaller Ultrabook.

The Competition

As we said at the outset, the M3 Acer is a bit too big and brawny to make a fair comparison to (what we consider to be) skinnier Ultrabooks like the ASUS UX31 and Toshiba Z830. Perhaps a more appropriate juxtaposition is with the Lenovo IdeaPad U400. That machine also packs an optical drive, similar specs and discrete graphics, plus a display with the same resolution, albeit in a 14-inch panel. Yet,

the U400 doesn't have the Acer's more spacious, numpad-equipped keyboard, nor the capabilities of a Kepler GPU. It does have a higher-quality aluminum build, however.

Full-featured (and sized) laptops like the HP Envy 15, Sony VAIO SE series, Dell XPS 15z and Samsung Series 7 Chronos could be called competitors as well, though it's difficult to compare them as Acer has yet to announce the Ultra M3's pricing. They have the same screen size and similar battery life and CPU options, but they boast far superior display quality and build materials. Additionally, the M3 is thinner than those machines and dominates them in both benchmark scores and gaming capabilities, thanks to its Kepler graphics.

Wrap-Up

With the Ultra M3, Acer has delivered some serious computing power in an incredibly thin package. In our opinion, it's simply too big to be evaluated as a true Ultrabook, though it is thinner and lighter than typical 15-inch laptops. Its high-end internals allow for some noteworthy performance, but its plastic construction and shoddy screen scream low-end, making it a bit of a paradox. We think what Acer has done is create the computer equivalent of a '70's muscle car shoving a premium powerplant in a subpar chassis: it's great at the (gaming) drag strip, but its shortcomings could make it a tough sell as a daily driver. It's an intriguing package, but without knowing its price point, it's impossible to tell whether it's worth taking the plunge. Regardless, we think that Acer and NVIDIA's latest collaboration has given us a glimpse of a gaming landscape populated by thin, light machines, and that's a decidedly good thing.

Michael Gorman is a Senior Associate Editor at Engadget, attorney, Hokie and 8-bit gaming enthusiast. He likes dogs, too.

BOTTOMLINE

Acer
Aspire Timeline Ultra M3

TBA

PROS

- Thin and lightweight
- Great gaming performance
- Super fast boot times

CONS

- Low-rent build materials
- Shoddy screen
- Lackluster audio capabilities

The Aspire Timeline Ultra delivers great performance in a svelte package, but a low-res display and cheap build materials keep it from being a lust-worthy laptop.

NYIAS 2★12

BY TIM STEVENS

THE NEW YORK INTERNATIONAL AUTO SHOW is not the biggest nor the most glamorous of the many such events that run throughout the year and around the world. Because of that, it rarely generates the most news, but it does hold one important record: it's the most visited. After the press has had its fun, the NYIAS is opened up to the public, where last year over a million flocked to fondle the latest wares from BMW, Mercedes, Audi, Ford and plenty of others. This year, the star of the show was the Terrafugia Transition, the supposed flying car that is actually more of a driveable airplane.

Fisker finally showed off its second major car, the former "Project Nina" now called the Atlantic. It looks lovely and could cost just half the price of the $102,000 Karma. However, the best looking car of the show was the reborn SRT Viper. It's officially no longer a Dodge, but it is officially gorgeous. It also has a new 8.4-inch touchscreen in the dash that lets you do the usual stuff (radio, navigation, etc.), but will also give you readouts on engine performance and cornering load. Okay, so it isn't particularly high-tech, but did we mention how good it looks?



PHOTO: TERRAFUGIA.COM

ACURA NSX CONCEPT







SUPERSTAR
The hybrid Acura NSX supercar was the star of the brand's first Super Bowl commercial.

FISKER ATLANTIC











AKA PROJECT NINA

The Atlantic is billed as Fisker's affordable followup to the $100,000 Karma.

SUBARU BRZ



EASY, BRZ-Y
Subaru's 2013 sports car was graced with a sub-$30,000 price tag.

NYIAS 2★12

BMW
i CONCEPTS











iCANDY
BWM showed off its sleek, and expensive i8 Concept hybrid and its more afford-able electric sibling, the i3.

DELOREAN ELECTRIC











BACK TO THE FUTURE

The DMC-EV is set for delivery in 2013, and will carry a $95K price tag.

SRT VIPER



HOT WHEELS
The 2013 SRT Viper and its racing counterpart ranked as the hottest things on wheels in our books.

NYIAS 2★12

NISSAN
NV200 TAXI











FUTURE CAB
Set for a late 2013 release, the $30,000 taxi features RFID payment and USB ports.

PRIUS C HYBRID





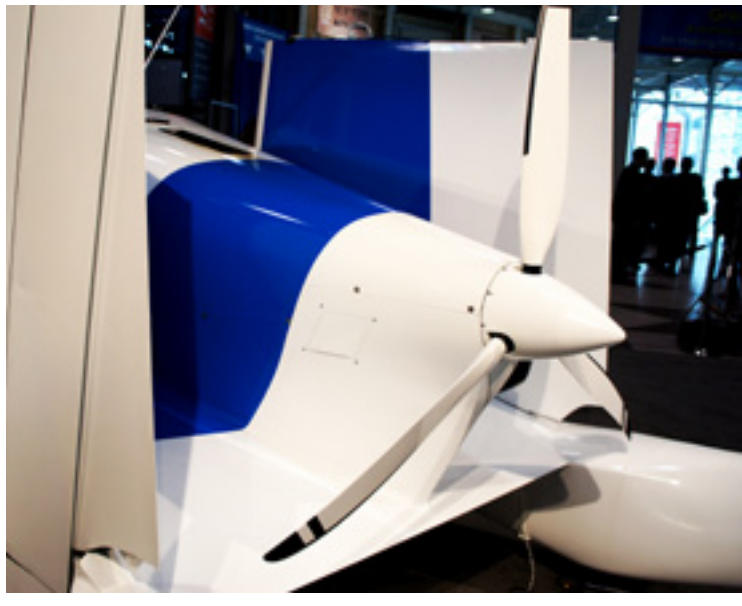




HIGH C
The newest addition to the hybrid lineup, Toyota's Prius C sold 1,201 units in three days.

TERRAFUGIA TRANSITION





IT'S A PLANE!
IT'S A CAR!
It's Terrafugia's Trasnsition: a flying car / drivable plane that'll set you back $279,000.

NYIAS 2★12


THE
ART
OF THE
GIMMICK



WAYNE COYNE talks about the Flaming Lips' history with technology and the pedigree of its upcoming album

BY **BRIAN HEATER**

PHOTOGRAPH BY **PAIGE K. PARSONS**

THE FLAMING LIPS

HAVE NEVER DONE ANYTHING SMALL, from the "Parking Lot Experiments" of the mid-90s to this year's Record Store Day album, "The Flaming Lips and Heady Fwends." Set for an April 21st release, the limited edition vinyl record features an odd cast of characters, including Bon Iver, Erykah Badu, Neon Indian, Nick Cave and Ke$ha, many of whom have lent their actual blood to the record.

"That is totally a gimmick," Wayne Coyne answers with great relish. "It's a beautiful gimmick. I think all things that we marvel over are based in gimmicks."

He's on the phone for a day of back-to-back interviews, a trapping of the job that would cause lesser, more jaded men

to roll their eyes and submit with dragged heels, particularly those who've been playing the game through 30 years and 13 LPs. But Coyne, much to his credit, dives into everything he does headfirst with the manner of childlike wonder that's come to be established with the vast majority of the Flaming Lips' catalog.

At the beginning of our conversation, he lets it be known that he's slightly distracted. His wife is photographing him. And he's in his underwear. He didn't bother putting anything else on, knowing that he'd be running a marathon of phone interviews all day. Maximum comfort is important. It's a hard image to erase from my mind as Coyne settles in to explain the band's decision to embrace Siri on a recent web-only track called "Now I Understand."

"There's so much about music and art, experiences in general, that are just unspeakable," he continues. "And we don't even have a real reason to even talk about them, but luckily there will be this gimmick, this thing that'll happen, that will be the spark that let's everybody not worry about sounding like a complete idiot when we talk about something. I love this voice of Siri. I use her quite a bit. You treat it like it's a real person in there that loves you and is trying to help you."

"Now I Understand" is a gimmick, sure, but it's not the sort of song you anticipate upon hearing that the band has embraced the iPhone 4S' soft-spoken, feminine voice. It's gentle and warm and strangely humane. "Wayne," Siri opens the track with her soothingly familiar monotone. "I don't understand." Coyne's Neil Young-esque falsetto is nowhere to be found — a rarity for a Flaming Lips song.

"Her voice is like music," he tells me. "It doesn't really have to be a musical instrument. It's evoking other worlds; it's evoking other things in your mind. I've had so many people say this is exactly the *2001: A Space Odyssey* technology; this is Hal."

And while he never opens his mouth on the track, Coyne has done his part, gently pushing her off on a cosmic journey, after some trademark Apple beeps, forgoing the standard Siri-fare in order to tackle much grander questions than fast food restaurants and driving directions. "I don't under-

5 INNOVATIVE ARTISTS TOYING WITH TECHNOLOGY

BJÖRK
BIOPHILIA

Released last October, *Biophilia* isn't just an album, but a virtual universe stuffed inside an interactive iOS app. Users discover songs (each its own "in-app experience") by floating through a 3D universe, accompanied by the theme song "Cosmogony."



(tap to go to iTunes)

YUNG JAKE
E.M-BED.DE/D

Yung Jake's e.m-bed.de/d gives new meaning to the phrase pop-up video. Through a series of pop-up windows, the Net Art musician tracks the success of a viral video in a desktop takeover that is the epitome of sensory overload.



(tap for link)

NEON INDIAN
PAL198X

The PAL198X analog synthesizer, designed by Neon Indian in collaboration with Bleep Labs, was included as a limited-edition extra in the deluxe set for the band's September 2011 release, "Era Extraña."



COURTESY OF DR. BLEEP

(tap for video)

stand," she answers some unknown question, "The moon, the stars and the sun." It's an awful lot for one little piece of mobile artificial intelligence to ponder, but she's got it after a couple of minutes, with a little vocal help from Erykah Badu and a backwards Biz Markie. "Now I understand," she utters the eponymous phrase, closing out the track.

"I think a lot of people always worry about this idea of gimmicks and serious art," Coyne continues. "It's all gimmicks. Without a gimmick, you haven't done your job. We always have to think of little things we can relate to, all the time."

And in the end, it's not the band's strongest track — this likely wouldn't be anyone's first choice for a Flaming Lips mixtape — but it's the latest in a long tradition of unblinkingly embracing gimmickry and playing technology itself as an instrument. It's a tradition that can be traced back most notably to "The Parking Lot Experiments" of the mid-90s, a parking garage orchestra performed on the cassette players of dozens of cars, conducted by Coyne from behind a familiar bullhorn.

Mass-produced, the concept morphed into 1997's "Zaireeka," a four-disc album meant to be played on multiple stereos simultaneously, a sort of home game version of the "Experiments." A hell of a gimmick, that, and one that would help lay a sonic foundation for future Lips releases, including 1999's "The Soft Bulletin," a neo-psych pop masterpiece largely regarded as a high water mark in the band's career. Around Valentine's Day last year, the whole thing took an even more ambitious shift, harnessing the power of YouTube for the delightfully titled "Two Blobs F*cking," music for gelatinous copulation brought about when a dozen different short clips are played simultaneously. Forget the unwieldy car stereo — heck, forget the outdated CD boombox — this is a spontaneous musical happening orchestrated with a dozen or so smartphones.

"I was just at some shows over the weekend, where it's a giant communal experience," Coyne tells me. "I don't know if we're ever thinking that technology is gonna be the thing that makes that. For me, it isn't really just about music, it's about energy and about being near people that like the

DJ SPOOKY
SELF-TITLED APP

As seen on the Engadget Show, DJ Spooky's iOS app may not be one of a kind, but it marks a greater trend to put the user behind the virtual turntables. The self-titled program lets users remix downloadable Spooky tracks and layer them with exclusive sound effects.

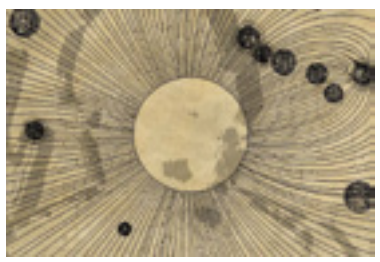


ROBERTO MASOTTI

(Tap to go to iTunes)

FLYING LOTUS
COSMOGRAMMA FIELDLINES

Flying Lotus created this free desktop app in association with Aaron Meyers in anticipation of its 2010 album "Cosmogramma." Fieldlines harnesses the power of the webcam to allow users to manipulate sound and visuals with the wave of a hand (or two).



(tap for app)

same things, and the possibility of sex, all these sorts of things come into it."

But for all the talk of technology's tendency to isolate users, it offers a faint glimmer of hope, providing a musical experience that can only truly be created with several humans, gadgets in hand. Sure, it's not quite a live Flaming Lips show, with Coyne rolling over the heads of audience members in a giant inflatable hamster ball, but it's a break from sitting alone, at home, beneath a pair of headphones.

"I really don't think technology is forcing us apart," he explains. "I think we're lucky that we get to travel on airplanes now and instead of being forced to deal with the people that are sitting next to you, we all are allowed to have the luxury of our own little piece of entertainment. Even now, when we're having a conversation in a restaurant, we all look at each other and we know, we're gonna have a little bit of phone time — I've got some texting I need to do. It's no longer this barrier, and in the time when we're not on the phone, we say this is our time together. Let's talk and look and embrace each other, whatever, but if we didn't have that option, that would be a strain as well. I think we like the idea that we're gonna be connected all the time, but we're connected right now too. We can do both. I think the human mind is so much more capable of so much more than we think it is."

And what about the great rock record? Technology is doing away with that too, right? With iTunes culture returning us to a pre-Beatles era dominated by singles. Certainly a bit more of the Lips' focus has shifted in that direction, as the band embraces technology on a song-by-song basis, be it Siri, YouTube, or, say, "Drug Chart," "In Our Bodies Out of Our Heads," "Walk With Me" and "Hillary's Time Machine Machine," which were bundled on a USB key and housed inside a big gummy skull (not to be confused, of course, with the band's gummy fetus offering) — one that had to be eaten in order to liberate the music inside. The band will also be commemorating this year's Record Store Day (Saturday, April 21, 2012), with the release of a limited edition colored vinyl pressed with the blood of a number

of its diverse collaborators, including indie darlings Neon Indian and, oddly, pop princess Ke$ha.

But the band hasn't been entirely swept up in such one-offs. 2009 saw the release of "Embryonic," a hard-psych tour de force, one of the most cohesive LPs of the Lips' career and certainly its most critically acclaimed since 2002's delightfully apocalyptic examination of the struggles of man vs. machine, "Yoshimi Battles the Pink Robots."

"There's still a part of me that loves this idea of sitting there with nine or 10 songs and having it be an extended moment of mood and atmosphere and sounds and melodies, so we're probably gonna do both," Coyne explains. "We're embracing songs when that works for us and we're also embracing these bigger movements of music when that works for us too. It's all available. Technology suggests that the new thing should throw out the old thing. Art isn't like that. It's just another thing that you can do."

Things like tossing musical ideas into the cloud as soon as you've birthed them from your head — a constant stream flowing on the web, 24 / 7.

"My guys are always working," says Coyne. "We have a couple of 24-hour streams that you can always just go to and download. We have one that plays our 24-hour song. Anytime you go to it, it's a stream that's always playing. We put up a new one at the end of last week that plays an hour-and-a-half-long sound documentary about one of our albums that came out 20 years ago and you can just go to it anytime."

"You press two buttons on your phone and you've got this great thing," Coyne explains. "For me, I think that's the way a lot of our things will be moving; that we'll always just present them. They'll be going anytime that you want to go there; you can go there and it's playing something we're doing. It's not marketing, it's not promotion, it's just another way that you're gonna be able to hear music, hear our ideas, hear what we're doing, hear what we're into."

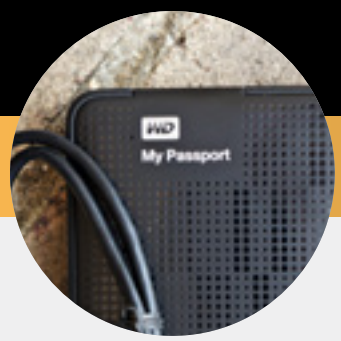
And really, if it means unfettered access to Coyne's strange and ever enlarging brain — gummy or otherwise — long live the gimmicks.

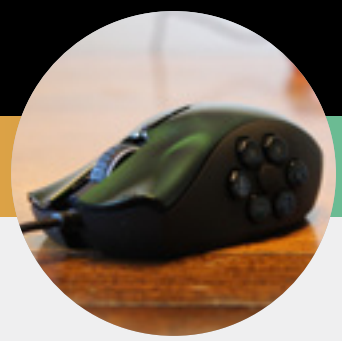
LISTEN TO SIRI SING ON "NOW I UNDERSTAND"

IN REAL LIFE

Welcome to IRL, an ongoing feature where we talk about the gadgets, apps and toys we're using in real life and take a second look at products that already got the formal review treatment.

1. 

2. 

3. 

Blue Mic's Yeti, Western Digital My Passport and Razer's Naga Hex Gaming Mouse

BY ENGADGET STAFF

It's been a busy week for tech writers. Capping out a week populated by not one, not two, but three smartphone reviews, we're happy to take a breather and return our attention to life's littler pleasures. Like USB mics and portable 2TB hard drives. And also, gaming mice.

Blue Microphone's Yeti

It's no secret that Blue has a firm grasp on USB mic peripherals. They've long been the choice of podcasters, and now I know why. I've had my Yeti for over a month and have been using it mostly for cameos on the Engadget podcast.



After connecting to my '06 iMac, firing up Skype and adjusting a couple of settings, I'm on air within minutes. The kit is more than up to the task and in particular I've found myself using the on-board mute button to make sure no unwanted noise makes it into the final recording. Speaking of which, the Yeti offers some excellent sound quality, and doesn't pick up things like the AC or folks hanging out nearby.

While the mic does offer an audio output for headphone / earbud monitoring (with volume control on the chassis), I find myself using the jack on my computer most of the time. On occasion, I'll make use of that feature while recording voice tracks for a review video in Audacity, but that's not exactly a regular part of my routine. I imagine if I had some vocal chops and were in the habit of recording demos I'd get a lot more mileage out of that capability... but I digress. The built-in pattern and gain controls are a nice touch, too, though using the Yeti predominately for voice recording rarely forces me to tweak those knobs. Also a plus: the included high-quality desktop stand. This USB mic is a beast, and if you're looking to get serious about your podcast or voiceovers it's definitely a solid buy. — *Billy Steele*



Western Digital 2TB My Passport portable HDD

The race to shove 4TB into a palm-sized external drive is officially *on*. It wasn't too long ago that a drive the size of WD's new My Passport would only hold a few hundred gigabytes, but the outfit's latest USB 3.0 drive manages to contain a staggering two terabytes of information. The HDD itself is surprisingly compact, if not a touch cute, but certainly thicker than the (admittedly less capacious) GoFlex Slim.

Aside from being light and highly portable, it's also USB-powered. At last, 2TB of storage at your disposal without the need for an AC power tether. Oh, and it's also a USB 3.0 drive. Even when using it with a USB 2.0 machine, I consistently saw transfer rates between 28MB/s and 31MB/s, while USB 3.0 transfers are just under double.

At $250 for 2TB of USB-powered data storage, it's hard to knock the newest My Passport. Once rival storage makers start producing similar units, the pricing that results will likely make it an even bigger no-brainer. *— Darren Murph*

Razer Naga Hex gaming mouse

When you're at a desk as much as I am, you pay attention to your peripherals. My keyboards, mice, headphones and gamepads are all selected for maximum comfort, because if I'm not working at my desk, I'm often *gaming* at my desk. The latest gadget competing for a little surface area has been Razer's Naga Hex, an ergonomic rodent



designed to give gamers an edge in action-RPG titles. It's a slightly simplified variation on the Naga MMO mouse, albeit with six fewer switches hugging its left side.

The unit's bevy of buttons definitely gives my thumb a wider array of toggles than my Rat, with six hexagon shaped triggers on the left side. Having my keyboard's numeric keys within my opposable's reach came in handy during a recent replay of the *Mass Effect* series, but their hexagonal shape makes them difficult to differentiate by feel alone — I often find myself clicking the wrong toggle by mistake. Learning the buttons' layout is further complicated by the keys' non-sequential order, counting one, two, three, six, five and four in a circle. I eventually committed this to memory and got my game on mostly unhindered, but I still manage to thumb the wrong button on occasion. Chalk it up to having enormous hands.

Speaking of gargantuan mitts, the Hex fits in mine well enough, comfortably tilting my wrist slightly to the right. The mouse's smooth back and seductive curves offer comfortable purchase for most of my fingers, but leaves my pinky hanging – that's enough to make me miss my Rat's finger rest. The rodent's black and green veneer looks and feels slick, too slick, in fact. The glossy surface feels so smooth that I repeatedly try to wipe a non-existent oil off its back, all the while growing increasingly paranoid that my new peripheral was filthy. The Hex's button layout may be a bit cramped for my enormous thumb, and it may have set off some of my obsessive compulsive tendencies, but I had no trouble using it to take down Geth hordes. Even so, my orphaned pinky and I will be going back to our magical transforming Rat 7, where we can always *change* what we don't like. *— Sean Buckley*



CRACKBERRY'S FOUNDER AND EIC TAKES SOME TIME OUT TO CHAT ABOUT HIS NEED FOR SPEED AND BEING A BLACKBERRY DEVOTEE.

KEVIN MICHALUK

Q&A

What gadget do you depend on most? When mobile, ALWAYS my BlackBerry. I've rocked every model since 2005, but am currently using the exclusive (and expensive) Porsche Design P'9981 BlackBerry. BlackBerry is still the best communication tool on the planet.

Which do you look back upon most fondly? Old Blue. The BlackBerry 7290. That was my first BlackBerry. It was big. It was ugly. I didn't think much of it. Then I started using it, fell in love and got seriously addicted. The idea to launch CrackBerry came soon after. Looking back, that phone literally changed my life.

Which company does the most to push the industry? It goes in cycles. Palm and BlackBerry did a lot to propel the smartphone industry and enjoyed several years of success. Apple came in with the iPhone and iPad and pushed mobile to a new level that left everybody scrambling to catch up. I'm not sure who will be next to really push things a big leap forward. Technologies like Lytro and that "Window" concept Samsung showed off back at CES get me excited that there are still really cool things to be done in the tech world.

Of course, I'm rooting for BlackBerry to show off some industry-changing innovation again — they're due for a win and BlackBerry 10 shows lots of promise.

What is your operating system of choice? Like most tech bloggers these days, I'm now a Mac guy. Made the switch a few years ago. I sort of hate Lion though. It's messy. I have a fully loaded 15-inch MacBook Pro, but even with i7, a 512GB SSD hard drive and 8GB of RAM I find it's constantly slowing down on me these days. I'm anxiously waiting for Apple to release a new Mac Pro so I can build a killer desktop workstation, max out the RAM and daisy chain three 27-inch monitors to it (all mounted to my Anthro Elevate Adjusta standing desk). Hopefully that will be able to keep up with me.

What are your favorite gadget names? I actually loved the "BlackBerry Storm" name. Too bad the device was so bad that it forever tarnished "Storm" as a gadget name. I also think "PlayBook" was a clever name for a tablet. Geez. Every time I love a product name the device has a bad launch. Next question.

Every Android phone and tablet name. Seriously, they're all really, really bad.

What are your least favorite?

ANSWER

Which app do you depend on most? Email, final answer. I became a BlackBerry addict for a reason. Messaging (email, texting, BBM, etc.) and web browsing are still the two activities I do most on my smartphone.

What traits do you most deplore in a smartphone? Bad battery life. A smartphone with a dead battery is a paperweight. Awesome capabilities and features don't matter if the phone is dead when you want to use it. I NEVER want to be concerned with the battery during my waking hours. I'm going to plug in every night when I go to bed. Between charges, I don't ever want to worry about not having enough juice.

Which do you most admire? The ability to get things done FAST. The thing I have always loved about the "traditional" BlackBerry phone experience is that it was designed for one-handed, on-the-go use. If you want to do a basic task — check a message, look up a contact, dismiss a calendar alert, etc. — the time between grabbing your phone from your pocket and putting it back is minimal, and you never had to stop whatever else it was you were doing. The experience wasn't sexy, but it was fast. Even with the old track wheel BlackBerry phones, I remember thinking about how smart it was that when I hit the menu key, it was almost always on the option I needed to use. Seriously, I could literally use a track wheel BlackBerry with my eyes closed.

With today's modern touchscreen operating systems, priorities have shifted. Whether it's iOS or Android or Windows Phone or even the BlackBerry PlayBook OS, it's now more of a "stop what you're doing and use the device" experience. Yes, it's more intuitive and a lot sexier and you have a more engaging app experience on the phone. But, it's also a slower experience from start to finish, especially for those basic tasks, which are what I find myself doing 80 percent of the time. When we look into our CrackBerry community, this is one of those things that every longtime BlackBerry user notices when they try a phone from a different platform.

What is your idea of the perfect device? A couple years back I put forth a theory, called CrackBerry Kevin's Smartphone Hierarchy of Needs, which played on Maslow's theory of needs. To date, if you truly want a no-compromise mobile experience — you want to be a self-actualized mobile user — you really need two devices. A BlackBerry phone for the best communication experience and another full touchscreen device (be it a phone or tablet or something like an iPod touch) for the best app and media experiences.

I'm longing for the day when one device can offer the best of both worlds with NO COMPROMISES. I'm really hoping BlackBerry 10 phones can be the first to do just that. If Research In Motion can keep the best of the traditional BlackBerry communication experience and marry it to the much-improved app experience and user interface of the QNX platform upon which the PlayBook OS is built, we could see just that when the phones hit later this year. Of course, BlackBerry still needs to close in on the app race and make sure ALL the apps people want are there at launch. With BlackBerry World coming up in May, we should hopefully get a glimpse of what the BlackBerry 10 phone experience will look like.

What is your earliest gadget memory? Playing Atari. I spent a lot of our hours trying to beat my older brother's high score on *Seaquest*. That was back in the day when you would take a photograph of the high score with a non-digital camera, develop the film, then snail mail the photograph of the high score with a handwritten letter to the company so they can

see it and maybe mail you back six months later acknowledging how awesome your high score truly was. Sounds crazy, right?

What technological advancement do you most admire? The Internet. It connected the world and truly changed everything.

Which do you most despise? Wireless access to the Internet. Lol. I kid of course. But seriously, it's *so hard* to disconnect these days, especially now that the world has an expectation that you should be able to respond to any and every message within two minutes, regardless of where you are or what you're doing. Of course, I'm the worst offender here, expecting everybody I work with and know to respond to my emails in seconds. Let's stop the madness people!

What fault are you most tolerant of in a gadget? According to my personality profile, apparently I value utility over aesthetics. And I think that rings true when talking gadgets. While I still prefer good-looking gadgets to ugly ones, I'll tolerate ugly or weird looking as long as it works well.

Which are you most intolerant of? Anything slow. Or anything I can't figure out relatively easily on my own. If I need to open an instruction manual in the year 2012, there's an issue, and it's not with me.

When has your smartphone been of the most help? When traveling, for sure. Luckily, I've never experienced a life-or-death MacGyver moment where the smartphone saved the day, but just in general. I think back to ten years ago when I went backpacking in Europe, without a smartphone. I was always lost, and never quite comfortable in the decisions I was making. Should I stay in this hotel? Should I eat in this restaurant? How do I get there anyway? Now with Google Maps and the internet in your pocket you feel like the world is now your domain. I'm much more at ease when traveling. And if you own a BlackBerry, make sure you fire up that BlackBerry Travel app. It's awesome. It's reason enough to go out and buy a BlackBerry.

What device do you covet most? The one I don't have. Which at the moment is a BlackBerry 10 phone. Otherwise, thanks to a career in tech, I'm fortunate to get my hands on everything.

If you could change one thing about your phone what would it be? How about giving me a nuclear-powered battery that lasts for 90 years? Or maybe a holographic projector? Both would be sweet. Or, heck, how about Skype? Skype better be on BlackBerry 10 at launch!

What does being connected mean to you? At home or the office, when I'm connected it means I'm in work mode. If there's a screen in front of me connected to the internet, it's hard for me not to work. Away from the office, being connected via mobile means I'm always on call. Thankfully, working in the mobile tech space is fun. I love what I do. Of course I'm also more connected to my friends and family and all the personal things I enjoy doing, but I find it very hard to separate work from family when connected. So I don't try to anymore. I work 24 / 7 and I enjoy life 24 / 7. For the most part that mentality seems to work well for me.

When are you least likely to reply to an email? When I go to the gym I force myself not to take my phone with me. I used to, but then when I'd see the red light blink I'd start emailing and texting and that was the end of that workout, so no more.

When did you last disconnect? I went to Mount Tremblant skiing for New Year's, and I forced myself to leave my phone in the lodge when I was on the slopes during the day. I still checked my email at night, but I went three days there being pretty disconnected. It was enjoyable.

CrackBerry Kevin's Hierarchy of Smartphone Needs

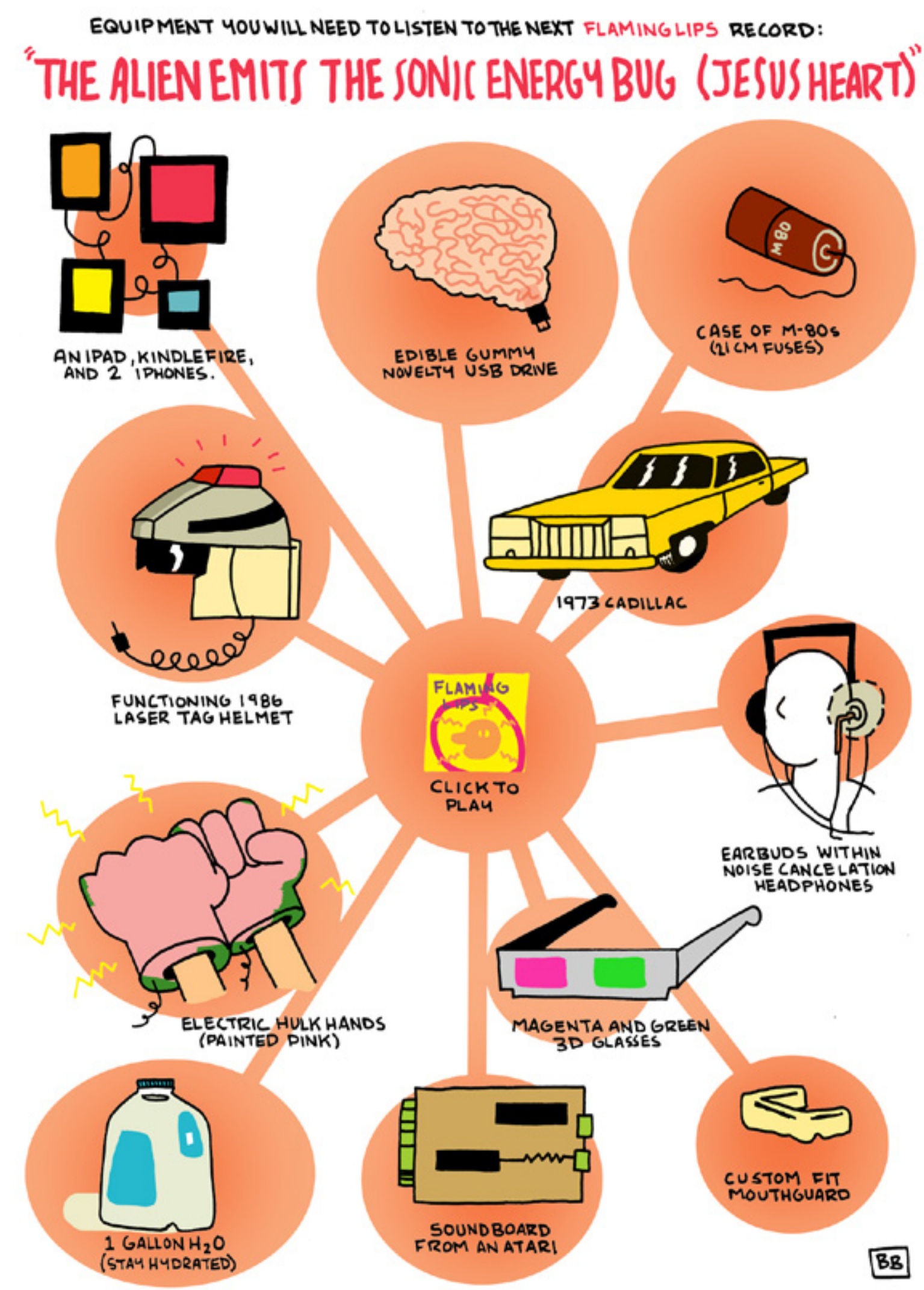
No.1
AN APP FOR EVERYTHING
Apps to enhance your job, studies, hobbies, etc., apps for entertainment, apps to kill time, apps just for fun.

No.2
FEATURES FOR EVERYDAY LIFE
Media player, GPS nav and maps, camera, video recording, alarm clock, calculator, etc.

No.3
COMMUNICATION AND PRODUCTIVITY
Telephony, email, SMS, IM, web browsing, PIM, docs, etc.

No.4
DAILY USABILITY AND PERFORMANCE
Reliability, battery life, ergonomics, aesthics, speed and ease of use.

No.5
CONNECTIVITY, COMPATIBILITY AND SECURITY
Satisfactory voice / data coverage (carrier), works with your systems, proven security.

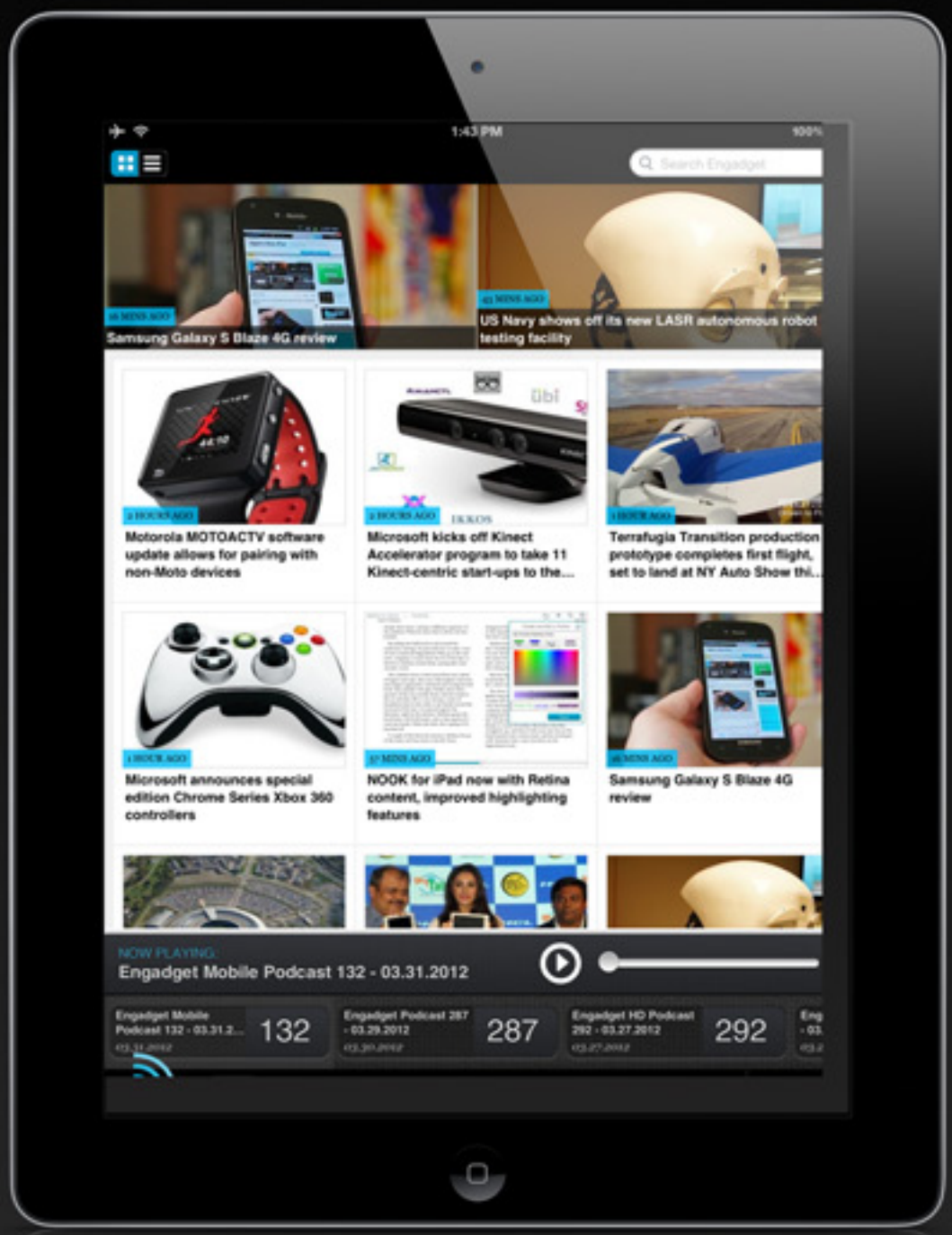


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